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Natsu Hyuuga
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illustration
しのとうこ

Los Diarios De La Boticaria

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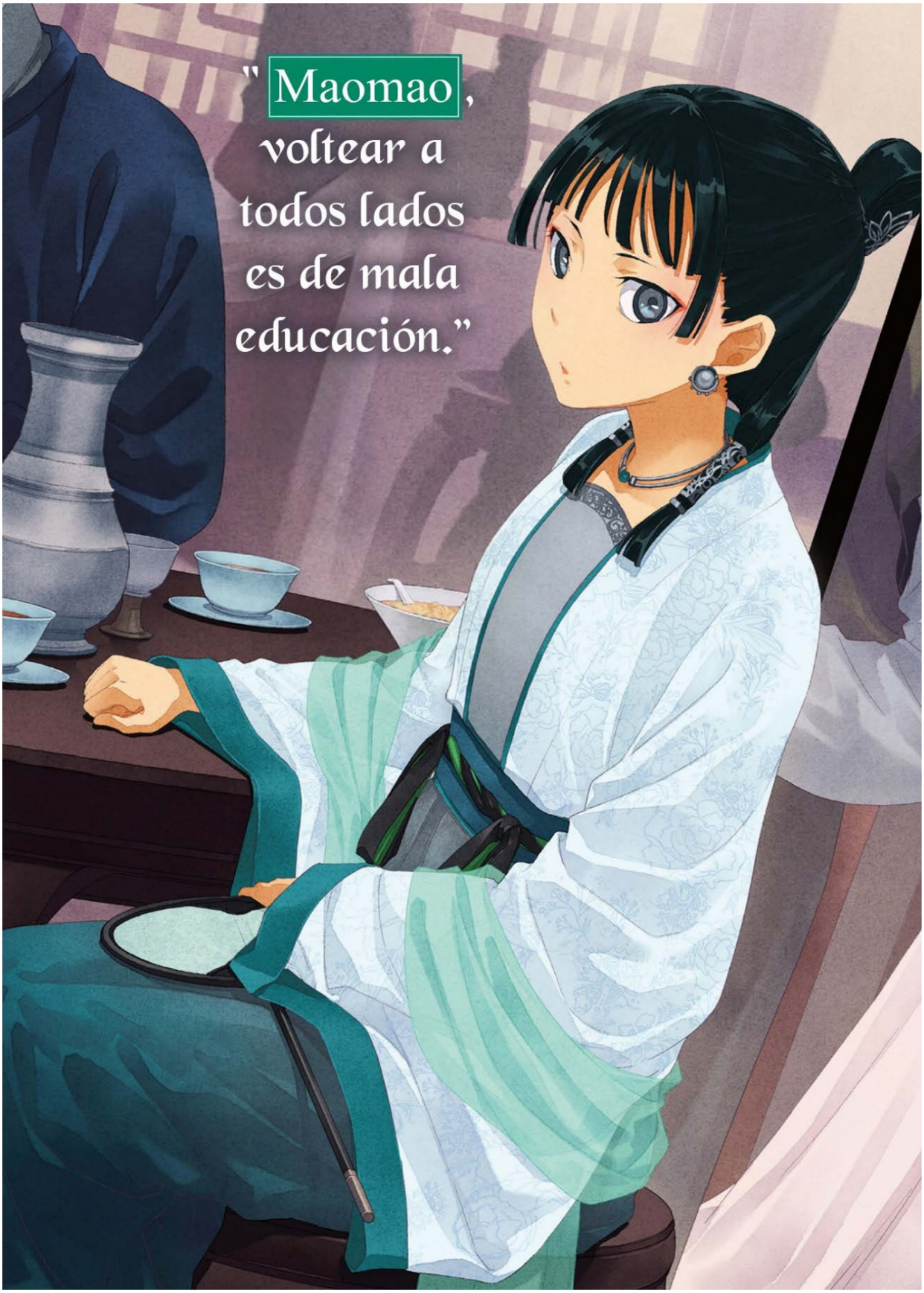

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Character Introduction:

Maomao

She is the protagonist, a pharmacist who originally worked in the red-light district. After her experience in the imperial court, she now works as a court lady in the service of a medical officer.
He has a rather prickly character, but has softened his attitude over time.
He still likes to experiment with poisons and remedies.
He doesn't like his biological father, Lakan. He is 21 years old.

Gender

A young man with a heavenly appearance like that of a goddess. There is a noticeable discrepancy between his striking appearance and his honest character, which often causes misunderstandings around him. He aspires to be like Lahan's brother in his next life.
His real name is Ka Zuigetsu. He is twenty-two years old.

Pool

He is Jinshi's assistant. He is Gaoshun's son and is in love with Lishu, the emperor's former consort. He is 22 years old.

Chue

She is the wife of Baryou, Gaoshun's son. Although she seems carefree, she belongs to the Mi clan and is an expert in espionage activities. She lost the use of her right hand while trying to save Maomao.

Gaoshun

Former attendant of Jinshi, now in the service of the emperor. His wife, Taomei, who is Jinshi's servant, has more authority over him.

Earth

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He is a small man who wears glasses, but for some reason he is very popular with women. He is good at calculations and very resourceful.

Lahan's older brother

He is much more competent than he imagines, which leads him to miss opportunities. Since everyone calls him by his name, he has come to accept it. He has a talent for agriculture. Lakan

Maomao's biological father. He is Luomen's nephew. A strange strategist who wears a monocle but holds the highest rank in the army. He is a lover of sweets.

Meat research

A high-ranking military officer. The eldest brother of all. He is interested in acquiring the freedom of the courtesan Pairin.

Suiren

Jinshi's maidservant and wet nurse. He is quite tolerant of him.

Gyokuyou

Emperor's wife. A beautiful young woman with red hair and green eyes. She is the mother of the princess of the Eastern court, but is often considered unsuitable as an empress due to her origins in the Western capital. She is twenty-three years old.

Their

Maomao's colleague. Vice Minister Lu's niece. A naive young girl who strives to live independently.
Recently, he started taking an interest in Lahan. He is seventeen years old.

And and

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Maomao's companion and Yao's servant. Although she is under Yao's command, Yao's inability to become independent falls largely on her shoulders. She is very concerned about Yao and his interest in Lahan. He is twenty-one years.

Tianyu

A novice doctor who has an unconventional interest in dissecting bodies. He is a descendant of Kada.

Maamei

Basen's sister. When her mother, Taomei, accompanied her father Gaoshun to the Western Capital, she took care of the Ma clan. She is quite domineering.

Court Doctor Liu

Senior physician and former acquaintance of Luomen. He provides a stern education to Maomao and his friends.

Court Doctor Li

A mid-ranking doctor who was with Maomao in the Western Capital. He became incredibly strong after going through several battlefields.

Which

One of the three princesses of House Verdigris. A talented young woman who memorizes the four books and five sutras. Has a broken jade slab.

Pairing

One of the three princesses of House Verdigris. A beautiful, voluptuous woman who is an expert in dancing.

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Lishu

Former high-ranking consort of the Emperor and the U clan. She is currently retired.

A-Duo

Childhood friend of the Emperor and former high-ranking consort. They have a son together. He is thirty-nine years old.

you smell

A young man with smallpox scars on his face. He has a cheerful personality and is an exceptional doctor.

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Chapter 1: The Gathering of the Greats – Part One

The next morning, after returning from Jinshi's house, Maomao was rudely awakened by an unexpected person.

“Maomao, chord!”

“…Or what has gone wrong, En'en?”

Maomao was exhausted from everything that had happened the night before. She had fallen asleep without even brushing her teeth. On top of that, he had left the food and drink half-finished.

“Change quickly.”

“…We had plans for today?” Maomao took off his clothes with slow movements and sleepy eyes. Since he decided to go to Jinshi last night, he should have today off.

“It’s not exactly a plan, but something important has emerged.
We need you to come with us,” En'en said with a serious look.

"Aren't you going to ask me if I can?"

"What are your plans for today?"

“I have nothing in particular today...”

(Should I say I had nothing planned?)

"You work tomorrow, right?"

"Sim, mas..."

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"Don't worry, I already made sure they gave you the day off."

"What? Why?" Before Maomao could understand what was happening, En'en discovered her and made her quickly change her clothes.

“Where are we going? And speaking of which, where is Miss Yao?”

“The young lady is already in the carriage outside. I will explain the details to you when we are on the way.” This indicated that he had no right to refuse. Maomao was quite tolerant, but even she had limits. I felt that Yao and En’en, although not as much as Lahan, were overdoing it a bit.

"What if I say I refuse?"

It is necessary to establish limits in human relationships. One should not give the impression that one will always do what others say.

“I’ve prepared a reason that you won’t be able to refuse. It’s something you like, Maomao.

“Do you think they can bribe me with items?”

(Aren't they underestimating me too much?) Even Maomao could be in a bad mood. He still hadn't recovered from the tiredness of the previous day. The only thing he wanted was to rest.

"Here you go."

En'en placed a thick book in front of Maomao. It had a luxurious leather cover with a title in a foreign language and drawings of flowers. Maomao's sleepy eyes opened. He swallowed
dry.

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"...Can I navigate through it?"

"Move forward."

"¡¡Jojojojojojojojojo!!"

It was a botanical catalog. It looked like print, but the drawings were incredibly detailed. It was a book that Maomao had never seen before, with many plants that she was unfamiliar with. Although it was in a foreign language, it was invaluable to Maomao, even if it took time to translate it.

"Okay, the preview is over."

"Ahh!"

En'en took the catalogue from Muhammad. She, trembling, clung to En'en.

"Please let me see you a little more!"

"It's a valuable book. Apparently a dealer bought it on a whim and put it in a bookstore. It will be difficult to get hold of in the future."

"How much, how much?! I'll pay whatever it takes! If my salary isn't enough, I'll take out a loan!" "Are you addicted to gambling?" En'en, stunned, returned the book to Maomao. In return, he firmly grabbed her wrist, preventing her from escaping.

“I’ll explain, but could you get into the carriage now?”

“I’ll go up!” Maomao said as he tightly hugged the catalogue.

In the carriage outside the accommodation, there was Yao dressed in street clothes. En'en sat next to Yao and Maomao

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sat in front of them. As soon as Maomao got on, the carriage began to move.

"Where should we go?" Maomao asked Yao as he hugged the catalogue tightly.

“Maomao, do you know the meetings of the big names?”

“Big-name meetings?” Maomao tilted her head in confusion.

"What a disappointment."

"I'm disappointed."

“What kind of reaction is this?” Maomao looked at the two of them with irritation.

"Didn't you receive any letter from Master Lahan?"

"They became good fuel for the fire."

"..."

Lahan's letters usually contained many complicated details about Jinshi, so he had been ignoring them lately.

"Then you don't know anything about it."

“What is this big-name meeting? Is that where we’re going next?”

"Correct." En'en made a circle with his fingers.

“The big names are like the 'Ma' clan or the 'U' clan, right?”

"That's right. These are meetings between clans that have been given character by His Imperial Majesty, but our family has no name. I would like to

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to go, but of course I have no qualifications. That's why I want to go as a companion of Mohammed."

En'en seemed dissatisfied with the word 'escort'. "Why do you want to go? I don't think it's that interesting. Besides, as my companion, won't they kick you out as soon as you arrive?"
Maomao had no intention of posing as a member of the La clan. He didn't think they would let them in if they suddenly showed up asking to attend a meeting they knew nothing about.

“It’s Lahan’s condition. He said that if Mohammed went, he would take us too.”

“Ah, so it’s the work of those annoying four eyes.”

"Maomao" En'en looked at her disapprovingly for using vulgar language in front of Yao. Maomao no longer cared about those gazes, but decided to observe his language.

“If it’s a meeting, I think it will be something formal. Can I increase the number of participants that way?”

“It’s not so formal, it feels more like a social gathering. It’s good for forming new connections, so sometimes it brings people who want to introduce themselves.” As expected of the well-informed En’en, she knew a lot about this.

“Why does Miss Yao want to go to this big-name gathering?
Does she want to make connections?”

"Quite the opposite."

Yao spread out a stack of letters. A strong scent of perfume filled the narrow carriage.

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"How horrible! Could it be... a love letter?" Maomao asked, wrinkling his nose.

"That's how it is!" Yao confirmed.

Even for love letters, they were in bad taste. Both the choice of perfume and its intensity were unpleasant. Maomao realized how refined the letters she received were.

"Do you want me to see inside?"

"Por favor."

Maomao picked up a letter. Honestly, he thought it was rude to read other people's love letters, but the unusual aroma gave him a bad feeling.

"Eca…"

"Ugh, exactly," Yao said with a tone of contempt. En'en nodded. Love letters are often full of compliments to the recipient. However, the writer of this letter took the time to boast about his own abilities and lineage. While having self-confidence isn't bad, it borders on arrogance. Furthermore, the handwriting appears to be very sophisticated, suggesting that he may have hired someone to write it.

"While Maomao was in the western capital, a strange man noticed the young girl. We cannot accept that she continues to bring these letters."

En'en looked at the love letters with utter contempt. Maomao remembered wistfully how she used to make that expression.

"He comes during working hours and doesn't get discouraged even if other doctors kick him out. Plus, he now says he's already

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talked to the family about a positive relationship…”

It seems that Yao and the others had been through a lot during the year that Maomao was away.

(I had no idea)

(Was this what you were referring to the other day when you asked if you were having problems in your personal relationships?)

"Wow, that sounds serious."

“Don’t say that so lightly.” En’en’s face was serious.

"Yes. And this idiot now says he's going to talk to my mother. I never thought my uncle's absence would become a problem."

Yao's father passed away. His uncle, who is his guardian, is Vice Minister Lu. Maomao and the others returned from the western capital, but Vice Minister Lu stayed there.

“Your mother is a little naive about the world, so she can believe this man’s words. She believes that the greatest happiness for a woman is to marry someone from a good family.

Maomao had heard of Yao's mother, but she seemed to be the opposite of Yao in personality.

“So, if your mother falls for this man’s words, you could arrange a marriage with the consent of both families, right?”

"In that case, I would prefer my uncle to simply arrange an arranged marriage." At least Yao's uncle seemed to choose suitors with his niece's well-being in mind. He seemed like a competent person and did not behave in a manner

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inadequate with family members. However, for Yao, who preferred to work rather than marry, his uncle was more of a hindrance than a help.

“The reason we want to attend the nameholders’ meeting is because the author of these love letters belongs to one of these clans. We want to inform the head of your family that the young lady has absolutely no intention of getting married. We directly demand that you stop sending these , let's go annoying love letters.”

"Vaya..."

(It's crazy, it's very reckless)

En'en was usually calm, but when it came to Yao, she would lose control.

The man in the letter is problematic, but in the Li region, where men are respected, there is a possibility that Yao will be forced into marriage due to this man's actions.

However, is it wise to go straight into confrontation with a clan of big names?

"Maomao tried to read En'en's expression. En'en is not stupid; even if she lost her head because of Yao, she must have some tricks up her sleeve."

(This is Lahan too)

Although he knew what Yao’s purpose was, there was no way he could take them all. Even if it was an excuse to take Maomao away, he had to act according to a profit and loss calculation. He must have wanted to avoid antagonizing other clans.

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Furthermore, why would Lahan want Maomao to attend the big names meeting?

“I wonder if that weirdo is coming to the meeting too?” Mohammed asked.

"That's how it is."

"I'm definitely going home."

Maomao suddenly stood up, as if he was going to jump out of the carriage that was already moving. However, he was tightly holding a valuable illustrated book in his hands.

“Maomao, if you are going back, leave the book here,” En’en said, tightly holding Maomao’s sleeve.

“…”

“Please leave it here,” En’en insisted, still holding the sleeve.

And so, Maomao did not let go of the book and En'en did not let go of the sleeve.

The result was that Maomao, frowning, sat back down in the cart.

After an hour of bumping in the carriage, they arrived at a large mansion not far from the city.

“The meeting point is there. “It’s the Chuu clan’s secondary residence.”

"Yao looked out the window. Only a solitary house could be seen in the distance. Nearby was a river, a forest, and also a rural village. A quiet area, although less genteel, it was a fairly remote place."

"Hum."

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"Maomao answered without much interest. They woke her up early and the truth is that she was very sleepy."

“Let me explain a little. The gathering of the greats began a long time ago, when the head of the Chuu clan proposed to gather everyone together to have tea and have fun. So the Chuu clan, who was the initiator, always organizes the gathering.”

(It's the classic law of the proposer)

"It is a great inconvenience to their descendants."

“According to records, at first it was held every year, then it became every two years and now it is celebrated every five years.”

“That makes a lot of sense.”

With so many guests, hosting it every year would be a financial problem.

“By the way, the La clan hasn’t participated for fifteen years,” Yao added.

It seemed they had not participated since the strange strategist became the clan head. Maomao looked out the window of the wagon. In front and behind his wagon were two others, which seemed to be occupied by Lahan and the eccentric strategist.

(That idiot Lahan… He rented another carriage just because he doesn't want to travel with the strategist!)

A single cart should be enough for two people. Although it seems like he doesn't like unnecessary things, sometimes he does things like that.

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Maomao decided that once they got out of the carriage, she would avoid the strange strategist and complain to Lahan.

The carriage stopped in front of the mansion. There were already many guests and several elegant carriages were parked.

(It's an impressive mansion, but...)

As Muhammad associated with high society, he became quite particular about its aesthetics. He unwittingly compared it to imperial residences.

(It's a bad habit)

Although it was a mansion that only the richest merchants in the city could afford, he could not praise it sincerely.

Therefore, instead of focusing on the luxury of the residence, his evaluation focused on the good taste it presented.

Upon entering the door, Maomao saw that the sidewalk was covered with stones and there were gardens on the sides.

(The building itself is old, but well maintained and does not look dated)

The mansion, which seemed to have been built for the meeting, was very spacious. There were many similar rooms and servants could be seen guiding the guests. Although there were no flashy decorations, the columns and walls were finely crafted. The layout was open and airy, which seemed geared toward comfort during the summer.

There was a bamboo forest in the garden, creating an exquisite space. Bamboo is much more invasive than it looks, and if left unchecked, shoots can sprout everywhere, even breaking through the soil. It's difficult to deal with. Since there were no piles of leaves

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fallen, it was clear that the gardener was responsible for keeping everything in order.

The garden was divided into sections, probably to reflect the seasons, and the cherry trees looked splendid. If it rained, their beauty would be even more impressive. Although there were many brightly colored flowers, it seemed as if they had been planted with overall harmony rather than individual impact in mind.

"It's so cool!"

The eccentric strategist, who had just gotten off the cart, approached Maomao.

With an irritated expression, Maomao tried to stay as far away from him as possible, raising his hair like an angry cat. He thought about hiding behind Yao and En'en to ignore him, but one person caught his attention: Lahan's older brother.

"Brother!" he called to him.

“Yes, it’s me,” Lahan’s brother replied coldly.

“Lahan, big brother!”

“Don’t call me that!”

Lahan's brother apparently tolerated being called just “brother.”

“Lahan, elder brother, I am happy to see you back safe and sound.”

It was the first time Maomao had seen him since his return and she felt relieved. Although many misfortunes had accumulated, part of the blame fell on Muhammad for forgetting to inform him of his return to the capital.

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The older brother glanced at her before abruptly turning his face away.

(He is upset)

However, her gesture was so childish that Maomao wondered if she should mention it since it wasn't scary at all.

“Maomao, I heard that the food in this residence is delicious! We have to eat a lot!” The strategist looked very happy. It was obvious that Lahan had brought him just to satisfy his appetite.

"Let's go. It looks like they already have a room ready for us," Lahan announced, clapping his hands to guide them all. The three drivers of the cart, who also acted as guards, joined the group, all of them of great stature.

Maomao was worried about whether the third pilot, Sanfan (number three), would also be there, but even Lahan wouldn’t cause more trouble by bringing more people. He didn’t even want to think about a confrontation between Yao and Sanfan. Besides, if Sanfan was also absent, there would be no one to take care of the capital’s mansion. “Hey, we’re too old to clap our hands…” protested Lahan’s older brother. But with a creature with a childish mentality around, Maomao felt he had no choice. Besides, Lahan’s older brother was also kicking stones as if she were a little girl.

In front of the entrance, the servants formed two lines on either side, bowing their heads in welcome.

“Welcome,” said a burly older man who looked to weigh at least two hundred pounds. His cheeks were flushed, and he gave the impression of being not a servant but the master of the house.

“What an honor to have the members of the La clan participate in the meeting! According to records, it has been fifteen years since the last

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time. My name is Chuuki. Although I have left the position of clan head to my son and retired, I am still in charge of receiving our guests. “It is a pleasure to meet you.” it."

The old man, named Chuuki, reached out his hand to Lakan. However, Lakan was absent-minded, looking at the mansion while picking at his ear.

There was an awkward silence.

“Thank you for having us. My grandfather used to attend these gatherings. I hope we can spend some fruitful time together,” Lahan said, taking the old man’s hand instead of Lakan’s.

“Hahahah, Mr. Lakan is a free man like a bird, right?” Chuuki commented, not looking bothered at all as he walked around Lakan and walked up to Lahan’s older brother to shake his hand. Afterwards, he politely approached Maomao and his companions and greeted them, but didn’t go far enough to shake their hands.

“I would love to greet these young ladies, but I don’t want to cause unnecessary jealousy. I will have to refrain from doing so with much regret,” Chuuki joked. Apparently, his lineage inherited a knack for small talk.

“Come, come, we have a waiting room ready for you. Take your time tonight,” the man said as he led the group.

The servants led Maomao and the others down a long corridor that led to the inner courtyard. There were already some guests present, enjoying tea in a gazebo or feeding the carp in the lake.

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One of the guests noticed the group's arrival and looked at them, but when he saw who they were, his face paled and he quickly hid behind one of the gazebo's pillars. It was hard to tell whether his reaction was due to the eccentric strategist, who was distracted by following a butterfly with his eyes, or to Lahan's forced smile. Any of them could have been the cause.

“Yao,” Maomao muttered, casting a glance at his companion.

“Y-yes?” Yao replied nervously.

“I understand that you’re uneasy, but could you let go of my arm a little? “You’re squeezing me too tightly,” Maomao said, with an awkward smile.

(Because En'en is giving me a scary look)

Yao, realizing that he was clinging to Maomao, quickly let go of her arm and walked away with an embarrassed expression. She seemed to be quite nervous.

(At least the eccentric strategist here acts as a good repellent)

A smelly plant keeps insects away, and this man served the same purpose. Although, of course, the downside is that you had to endure the smell yourself.

The servant continued to lead the group down the hallway, past several rooms, until he finally led them to a secluded section.

"This will be your accommodation."

"Here?" Maomao observed carefully.

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The place felt different from the rooms where the other clans were located. It didn't feel like special treatment, but rather isolation.

"Wow, a secluded section. Well, at least if my father starts singing or dancing, it won't bother anyone. And if it catches fire, it won't reach the main house," Lahan said.

His comment, although drastic, was not at all unreasonable, considering that in the past that man had tried to blow up a section of the palace.

“Where should the women stay?” the servant asked, indicating that there was a main room and three private rooms.

“I would like to share a room with Maomao,” said the strategist, already lying down in one of the long chairs in the room as if he were in his own home.

“Since you are the oldest, you will have a room all to yourself,” Lahan stated firmly, causing the strategist to shrug his shoulders in disappointment. Lahan, on the other hand, was observing the room with the curiosity of someone visiting the city for the first time.

“Women can share the larger room. There shouldn’t be a problem if there are three of them, right?”

"Sim."

"Of course."

"Sem problemas."

Although there was no designated room for the three guards, the room was large enough for them to accommodate.

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Maomao and the others went to the corresponding room and placed their belongings. There were four beds and the sheets smelled fresh, as if they had just been changed.

(It seems they plan on us spending the night)

It was clear that the meeting would last until late.

“Even though it’s a meeting, it feels quite relaxed,” Yao said.

“Lunch will be served in the main hall at noon, so we should get ready,” En’en replied as she took Yao’s clothes out of the suitcases. There were also a large number of cosmetics and several elaborate hairstyles with heavy decorations.

“En’en, one question,” Maomao raised his hand.

“What’s wrong, Maomao?”

“You seem to be very excited.”

"It's an opportunity to introduce Yao-sama to the prominent families. We cannot allow any oversights in your arrangement," En'en commented firmly.

“But… does it matter what clothes I wear? Last night they made me try on a lot of clothes, it was tiring,” Yao said with a tired expression.

En'en was a very competent maid, but there was one thing missing: her excessive insistence on Yao's appearance.
“If you dress her so well, won’t she attract even more suitors?
“Does it really make sense for her to dress like that?” Maomao pointed out. After all, the goal was to repel Yao’s suitors, not encourage them. There was no point in dressing her up like she was a bakery cake.

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“…” En’en looked back and forth between Yao and the suits, clearly deep in thought. Although he was extremely efficient, when it came to Yao, he sometimes acted a little irrationally. After a moment of thought, he decided to reduce the number of ornaments in Yao’s hair by removing one of the heavy hairpins.

"Maomao, you should dress up a bit too."

“Okay,” replied Maomao, who was wearing his usual comfortable and practical clothes, perfect for moving freely and adapting to the weather. To those who saw her, she looked like a simple servant.

(Although…)

Maomao remembered the kind old man they had passed before. Although she did not greet the three guards, she addressed the three of them, which meant that she did not consider her a mere servant.
He should have researched his identity beforehand.

(Won't he just be a good person?)

Maomao stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I also brought clothes for you, Maomao. You don't need to hide by saying 'I'm not dressed to go out in public, enjoy the party without me'. You don't need to worry about that."

“…” Maomao was silent, not knowing how to respond.

"Well, it's almost time. We better get ready quickly," En'en added, handing Maomao a set of clothes as she began helping Yao get dressed.

“How boring,” Maomao muttered, resigned to change.

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Chapter 2: The Gathering of the Greats – Part Two

The banquet hall had a rather peculiar seating arrangement. “It’s about the size of a rice field,” according to Lahan’s elder brother. As a single room, it was quite large.

There was a large circular stage in the center, surrounded by round tables.

Yao and the others were still busy preparing and were outside. The eccentric strategist was left on the couch while he slept.

Maomao was a little uneasy, but since the guard and the strange strategist had stayed behind, she figured that she probably wouldn’t end up in any strange trouble. Plus, En’en knew how to deal with the eccentric strategist well. She wanted to believe that there wouldn’t be any trouble.

Therefore, Maomao went to the banquet hall together with Lahan and his elder brother.

“An arrangement that avoids hierarchy,” Lahan commented. Although he appeared to be a small and unimposing man, he was dressed in good quality clothes, which was typical of him.

“If a lot of important people come, it will be complicated, don’t you think?”

Maomao thought the same. If there is a stage in front, sometimes the back seats can feel neglected. The circular arrangement seems like a suitable decision to avoid that impression.
However, the two clearly arranged rows, with the important clans at the front and others behind, were quite conspicuous, which was a clear arrangement that would not cause any complaints.

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“Where should we sit?” Lahan’s older brother asked.

Lahan’s older brother, who was taller and had a decent face, looked somewhat confused. Despite his determined appearance, his nervous demeanor couldn’t hide the feeling of being an outsider.

“Wow, there are a lot of people here!”

“Brother, try to calm down!” Lahan said, visibly frustrated with his brother’s behavior.

The room wasn’t full yet; many of the round tables were empty. There were tables with characters like “ÿ” (Ma) and “ÿ” (You) written on them, but they were unoccupied. There were about twenty tables, each with seating for eight people, but not all of them were occupied. Interestingly, the mix of who sat at each table seemed quite even.

(There are many combinations of old and young.) Furthermore, the ratio of young men to women was quite even. Muhammad sat at a table marked with the character “ÿ” (La).

“Hey,” Maomao pushed Lahan lightly.

"What is happening?"

"Isn't this a place to arrange marriages?" Maomao narrowed his eyes.

"In a way, yes. It is common to bring talented or beautiful people from secondary branches of the family to introduce them to other families. They also bring those who wish to form ties with prestigious families. Of course, sometimes there are also some who do not. They are worth it. Oh, by the way, my parents met at a gathering like this.

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'Father' implied that he was referring to Lahan's real father.

(Isn't that really problematic?)

It's not just Maomao who is concerned about bringing Yao here.

“Actually, this is the worst place to bring them, considering your intentions,” Lahan said in a bored voice. If Maomao had refused to come, she definitely wouldn’t have brought them.

Lahan was cold to Yao. Maomao understood Lahan's attitude well. Although Yao didn’t seem to realize it, something began to grow inside him towards Lahan, something that was neither admiration nor love, but something indefinite. Showing affection only to be rejected by the other person was an unfulfilling situation.

(If only I understood soon)

However, Yao did not understand. Despite having a mature appearance, his heart was still that of a child. She didn't know what to do, and the way she grabbed and hurt herself was sad to see, but you could also see that growing up meant going through these experiences over and over again.

(Lahan is awkward with women)

He also felt that Lahan had trouble dealing with a young teenager. His actions only added fuel to the stubborn Yao's fire.

Lahan did not deny that this was a place for marriage meetings, but what was the other aspect?

"And in other aspects?" “It is an opportunity to showcase future successors, establish relationships or discuss business issues and even political influence. My grandfather loved these things,

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he used to attend all the meetings, I'm told.”

Lahan took a look outside the banquet hall. There were rooms arranged separately from the guest areas.

“In addition, there are separate breakout rooms designed to minimize noise. “They are ideal for private conversations.”

This must be Lahan's true intention. Well, as for finding a wife, Lahan's older brother might be the main target, but since they brought the eccentric strategist, perhaps it would be better not to expect too much.

"You're not involved in something shady, are you? You told me you were going to introduce me to someone." It seems he definitely lured his older brother with the promise of finding him a wife.

“You know I'm only interested in pretty things, right?”

"Yes, but there's something suspicious about you."

“Ah, yes, I suspect.” Maomao agreed with Lahan’s older brother.

"You appear to be working on a scam."

“A marriage fraud that takes advantage of people by appearing harmless,” Maomao added. Lahan’s brother continued.

“What kind of horrible person is this? May the ship you invested in sink, may it sink!”

“Sailors deserve better” Maomao felt compassion for the other sailors.

Lahan's elder brother continued to insist:

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“Let him stub his toe on the corner of the closet, let him stub his toe!”

“Let all your fingers become raw!” Maomao also chanted a rather harmless curse.

Lahan wondered, “Why are you and Maomao closer than me, who is your brother?”

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Lahan was upset. At least Maomao doesn’t see Lahan as a brother. Even worse, Lahan’s older brother is more like a real “brother.”

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"Would you like something to drink?"

Each table had a servant assigned to it, who made sure that nothing was missing.

“I'm going to have tea.”

“Do you have alcohol?” Maomao asked with his eyes shining.

“In moderation, okay?”

“I will enjoy it in moderation.”

They served tea to Lahan and fruit liquor to Maomao and Lahan's older brother. The fruit liquor contained digestive herbs, so it probably also served as an aperitif.

“No snacks? I’d like something sweet. Once you’re ready, you can wait until I call you.”

This was not only to feed the eccentric strategist, but also an indication for the servant to stay away.

As soon as the servant left, Lahan began to speak in a low voice.

"Do you know why I agreed to come to this meeting?"

"By women?"

"Isn't it to find me a wife?"

I expected Lahan's older brother to actually get a good recommendation.

“I want to get closer to an important person.”

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“So it’s a woman?” Maomao looked at Lahan coldly.

"Of course not! Look, that table on the right, diagonally."

Maomao looked at the table diagonally to the right. Five people were sitting there: a rather elderly man, a middle-aged woman who appeared to be his caretaker, and three boys. Two of them looked to be in their early twenties and the third was a boy of about ten. The table had the character “ÿ” (U).

This is the family of former consort Lishu. As expected, Lishu, who had become a nun, was not present.

“There’s an old man there.”

“You should say older,” Lahan corrected gently.

“Do you have any business with the U clan?”

Maomao heard that the U clan had fallen into disgrace. With Lishu gone, his father gone, and the trouble caused by his older half-sister. There didn't seem to be anything of interest to Lahan.

“Look at the table diagonally to the left.”

Looking away, Maomao saw an older woman, accompanied by a man who looked like her assistant and five young men. The table had the character “ÿ” (Shin) on it.

“There is an old woman there.”

“Again, major, please,” Lahan explained as if he were speaking to a child.

“What about the two elders of the U and Shin clans?”

“These two clans have been in conflict for about forty years. Apparently they got along well before, but after a

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big fight between the former chiefs, the entire clans started to get on bad terms.”

“Are these two elders the former heads of the family?”

“No, the woman is the wife of the former head of the Shin clan. She should now be called Grand Matriarch Shin. Although, you probably know the events of that time well. On the other hand, the elder of the U clan was the head back then, but…”

“Thanks to the adopted son-in-law who messed up, he became the clan head again since his retirement.”

Lahan picked up a sweet treat from the center of the table. Meanwhile, his older brother slowly sipped his fruit wine, wondering if he could make it himself.

“What was the cause of the fight between the clan chiefs?”

“They say it was because of a stolen family treasure. The Shin clan was the victim and the accused is the U clan.”

"Wow, that sounds problematic."

Besides, it happened forty years ago. It doesn't look like the treasure will appear now.

“But do you really care if these clans are fighting? It seems a bit cruel, but it’s none of your business.” Lahan’s older brother speaks in a low voice.

“Normally yes, but now the U clan is weakened. “Many are taking advantage of this weakness for their own purposes.”

Lahan explained it simply, as if he was teaching a child.

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“It hasn’t been long since the Shi clan went extinct. In a situation like this, you wouldn’t want to lose another renowned clan, right?”

“So, you want to reconcile the rival clans to restore the U clan’s power? I don’t think it’s that simple, and besides, do you really think you can solve a forty-year-old case?”

Maomao nodded as he heard Lahan's brother's words.

“Normally, yes. But the Shin clan is still searching for the family treasure, believing that it might still appear. If we can find it, can you imagine what great favor we could receive in return?” Lahan narrowed his eyes behind his glasses mischievously.

“So that’s your true goal,” Maomao muttered as he took a sip of fruit liquor.

“There’s something else that worries me. You remember the case of suicide by hanging in my adoptive father’s office, right?”

“And what does that have to do with it?”

“The culprits were three court ladies, but what if I told you that their families were related to the Shin clan?”

“...”

"Cooperate with me, little sister."

Maomao remained silent and finished his drink.

“Solving an incident from forty years ago is difficult, but there’s you, my brother, and my adoptive father. I wanted to bring Granduncle Luomen along as well, but it wasn’t possible. There’s only one, right?” Don’t you think so?

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Maomao knew well the story behind the decline of the U clan. He did not like to see the clan weakened by useless adopted sons-in-law.

While they were talking, Yao and En'en finally arrived.

(She said she would keep things simple...) Yao was very well-dressed. Of course, since it was En'en's work, it was not overloaded with excessive decorations. However, those who understand fashion noticed the dedication that went into his clothes, hairstyles, and accessories.

Maomao also received a set of clothes selected by En'en that were very tasteful. If En'en wasn't Yao's exclusive assistant, she would definitely be a first-class lady desired by many.

(If she continues like this, surely someone would want to marry her)

A wife's good taste is directly related to her husband's character. Good families do not favor wives with bad taste.

"That's it, En'en, don't worry about my hairstyle anymore."

"Ah, one more moment, please."

En'en still held a comb and camellia oil, while the eccentric strategist continued to wear a dazed expression, occasionally trying to dodge, only to be repositioned by one of the bodyguards.

(Being your babysitter must be tiring)

Today wasn't about work, so the guards were fulfilling the role of babysitters instead of the usual competent subordinates.

"I'm sorry for the delay. En'en has been very insistent."

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Yao apologized with a bow of his head. Lahan was smiling, but that was all, he didn't tell her to sit down or anything like that.

(Still as cold as ever)

Lahan prefers to keep things clear when it comes to his relationships with women. That’s why it bothered him that a young woman like Yao noticed him. He knew he shouldn’t give her false hope, but to be honest, his attitude wasn’t the most appropriate.

“You can’t keep Miss waiting…” En’en muttered with a tense face. This was really testing his patience.

Yao didn’t seem to mind and smiled. Perhaps her competitive spirit was ignited by the resistance. Yao’s feelings toward Lahan remained ambiguous: were they romantic, admiration, or simply curiosity about a type of man she had never met?

"I'm sorry. What should I do in a situation like this?"

The one who finally acted was Lahan's brother, who stood up to bring Yao and En'en's chairs closer.

“Thank you, Lahan’s elder brother.”

Yao, following Lahan's older brother's instructions, sits on the chair.

“Ha ha ha ha ha…”

Lahan’s older brother gave a forced laugh. It seemed that Yao had also started calling him “Lahan’s older brother.”
En'en also bowed his head politely to him.

“It’s almost time.”

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The other families are already seated, and the Ma family's seats are also occupied. Among the occupants are Basen and Maamei.

(So that's why they weren't around last night)

I thought Chue would be willing to participate in this kind of event, but he wasn't there. Maybe he was avoiding it due to some physical discomfort.

"Maomao, dear."

The eccentric strategist pushed Lahan, who was sitting next to Maomao, and sat down. Maomao gritted his teeth in warning.

"This outfit looks beautiful on you, but your hairstyle looks a little plain. How about using my hairpin?" The eccentric strategist offered a hairpin to Maomao in a honeyed voice.

“Wow…!” Lahan’s brother let out a sound as Lahan looked away.

The hairpin was silver, sword-shaped, adorned with a dragon coiled around it. Additionally, a purple amethyst skull hung from a chain that jingled as it moved.

Sword, dragon, skull. All the elements that children usually like before the coming of age ceremony.

“Isn’t it disrespectful to match a dragon with a skull? Plus, the purple amethyst is also a bit strange,” Yao commented. Maomao and the others nodded their heads slightly, as their faces clearly said, “Yes, there are many other things we could say…” but they chose not to mention this.

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They ignored Lahan's brother's comment, who muttered, “I liked that kind of thing before...”

“It’s disrespectful, so I decline.” Maomao firmly rejected the offer to use the wiretap.

"Oh, really?" The eccentric strategist looked dispirited.

“But I’ll keep it anyway,” Maomao added, taking the hairpin, making the strategist light up with happiness again.

(I will melt it down and sell it as a base material)

The materials were of good quality and, until then, all the ornaments that the eccentric strategist had given him had ended up being melted down for sale.

“Maomao, what kind of hairpin would you like next time?”

“Pure gold. No mixtures.

“Understood, pure gold.”

“Sister, please don’t say things that will increase our debts,” Lahan said with a serious expression.

(I wonder how much they owe now)

As they were talking, the sound of a gong resounded. It was time to begin, and a good-natured old man from the Chuu clan stepped onto the stage that was in the center of the round tables arranged around it.

“Thank you all for coming together,” the old man greeted, walking around in circles with a gentle smile. Although his behavior seemed a little comical, it was a sign of courtesy, as there was no distinction between the upper and lower seats.

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lower, which meant that it could not lean in just one direction.

“This time, after five years, there are some differences from the previous event…”

(Perhaps due to the disappearance of the Shi clan and the addition of the You clan) At the You clan's table, Empress Gyokuyou and Gyoku'en are not present. In their place are two people around thirty years old. Maomao guesses that they could be Gyoku'en's children.

Curious, she began to look at the other tables around her.

“Maomao, turning around is rude,” whispered Yao, whose face was slightly red, probably from nervousness.

However, the Chuu clan elder’s speech was endless. If he was truly being considerate of the guests, he should have taken the length of his speech into consideration as well.

The eccentric strategist, satisfied with the bugging issue, is already taking the sweets that Lahan had ordered earlier. Although he behaved relatively calmly, the guards behind him were still watching him closely.

(The speech is endless...)

The speech wasn’t over, but thankfully the food kept arriving at the table. In the center of the round table was a whole roast duck, along with dishes like jellyfish salad, century eggs, and fried bamboo.

(Roast duck...)

Glancing discreetly at the Ma family's table, Basen shows a complicated expression. He is probably thinking of the duck he has as a pet at home.

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“It’s a shame, but there’s not much you can do. They’re farm animals,” says Lahan’s older brother, showing a more pragmatic attitude as he appreciates the duck being cut up by the servants. Maomao tried to grab a bottle of yellow rice wine on the table.

“No, you can’t,” Lahan said, snatching the bottle away.

“Why not?” Maomao protested, narrowing his eyes in displeasure.

“You have a job, Maomao, so don’t get drunk,” Lahan replied as he ordered the servants to remove all the bottles of alcohol from the table. They only left some low-alcohol fruit liqueur.

Maomao decided to remain silent and continue eating.

The elders' speeches were endless. After the Chuu clan elder, another elder from an unknown family began to talk about Li’s story. It was all over about fifteen minutes later, and by this time Maomao’s stomach was completely full.

“Now, feel free to continue your conversations,” said one of the elders.

How long had they been waiting for these words? The entire hall burst into thunderous applause.

As the older crowd descended from the central stage, dancers dressed in flashy costumes appeared. Their graceful movements with the fabrics of their clothes were something to behold. Since it was a more relaxed gathering, the music was also lively and geared towards the younger crowd, creating an atmosphere conducive to conversation.

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The young men get up from their seats and start greeting others. Some talk to beautiful women, others greet leaders of other clans, and others introduce their acquaintances to other people.

The older people, who were sitting, watched these interactions with a smile on their faces. However, in some cases, it was the older people themselves who initiated the greetings when they liked someone.

It seemed that some factions had already formed among the youths, as several of them quickly headed towards the private meeting rooms. Now, as for the table of Maomao and company...

“Nobody comes near us,” says Lahan’s older brother as he sips his soup.

“If you get tired of waiting, brother, you can take a walk,” offered Lahan, who showed no signs of getting up, perhaps wanting to enjoy his meal in silence a little longer.

“No, that’s not exactly it,” Lahan’s older brother replied. Being a person of ordinary sensibilities, he probably felt uncomfortable being the only one excluded from this round table.

“En’en, this food is delicious,” Yao commented.

"Yes, miss. I will recreate it next time," En'en replied.

Yao and En'en were calm, coming prepared so that no one else would join.

Maomao, while enjoying the food, did not forget the main topic.

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“So, the insolent man who has been harassing Miss Yao is present?”
“He’s not here, but his family is attending,” Yao replied.

“What clan are they from?”

"Do clã U."

(Oh really?)

Maomao looked at Lahan. The narrow eyes behind his glasses became sharp, as if he was irritated.

“I’d like to talk to them now,” Yao said, trying to get up.

Lahan, Maomao and Lahan's elder brother were alarmed.
Yao and En’en were unaware of the rivalry between the U and Shin clans that had been mentioned earlier. Lahan’s elder brother, although uninvolved, acted tactfully as he read the atmosphere. He truly was a good person.

“Wait a moment, please,” Maomao said, exchanging glances with Lahan.

(Should we explain to Yao about the situation between the U and Shin clans?)

However, although En'en could understand, Yao was troublesome.
Deciding that it was best not to let her get involved, Maomao exhaled deeply.

“Do you have any contacts in the Shin clan?”

"...I don't." Yao said this with a somewhat strange tone.

"As I thought. Therefore, I think it would be disrespectful for Miss Yao to suddenly come and talk to an important member of the clan."

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“I understand,” Yao said, pouting.

(Has she matured a bit in the year I haven't seen her?)

Maomao looked at Lahan. He had probably already understood Yao and the others’ situation.

“I will propose a negotiation to the Shin clan. First, we want to go ourselves and settle things. I understand that Miss Yao wants to quickly resolve this annoying matter, but you are oblivious to it. If there is any loss to our family, they will have to leave immediately,” Lahan said.

Lahan’s words were harsh but fair. Yao bit his lip tightly and En’en took on a fierce expression. (Perhaps the one who hasn’t changed is En’en.) Maomao was afraid that Yao wouldn’t be able to grow up if something wasn’t done about En’en. He wondered if there was anyone who could calm En’en down.

"Then let's talk to the Shin clan now. In the meantime, I want you to stay here. Of course, when we finish our conversation, we will introduce you," Lahan continued.

“I have a question. Won’t it be troublesome if we stay here alone?” En’en asked, looking at Lahan.

"Don't worry. My older brother will stay with you."

"Que?!"

Lahan's older brother, apparently hearing this for the first time, stood up in surprise.

"T-they didn't tell me anything about it."

Lahan patted his brother on the shoulder.

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“Brother, it would be cruel to leave two beautiful women alone. I’m sorry, but could you stay here and protect them?

Lahan's older brother looked at Yao and En'en.

Lahan whispered in his brother's ear, although everyone could hear him clearly:

"Our father is indispensable in the negotiations. It would be a problem if all the men disappeared. Please, brother, I can only count on you for this."

"Ash, it's okay," Lahan's older brother conceded.

"I appreciate it, brother."

As he watched the scene, Maomao guessed that this was probably how he was convinced to go to the western capital. Lahan's elder brother was a very good person.

Chapter 3: The Shin Clan's Treasure

The bell that announces the time rings. “Well, it’s time to go,” Lahan said as he reluctantly stood up as well, followed closely by the eccentric strategist.

“So, brother, I am entrusting this to you,” Lahan said.

“Yes, yes,” Lahan’s older brother replied uncomfortably.

Leaving behind two of his guardians, only one accompanies Maomao and the others. It was the guard who had been watching the eccentric strategist all this time.

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“Erfan (number two), make sure our foster father doesn’t get lost,” Lahan said.

“Understood,” Erfan replied.

The fact that he is called “Number Two” suggests that he is someone personally recruited by the eccentric strategist. It is easy to
to understand.

He was a robust man in his thirties, with the typical physique of a guard. He had puffy eyes and a lifeless expression, but anyone who cared for the eccentric strategist all year would end up the same way.

The Shin clan also rose from their seats. The matriarch, her attendant, and another young man left the banquet hall. Lahan must have coordinated with the Shin clan in advance to set the time and place for the meeting.

As expected, Lahan entered the same private meeting room of the Shin clan. Apparently some of the other rooms were also occupied, with signs indicating their use.

Inside the room was a long table, with three chairs on each side. Three against three, with one guard for each group.

“Well, thank you very much for accepting my proposal on this occasion, Matriarch Shin.”

("My proposal"?)

Lahan was showing his more professional expression than usual.

The eccentric strategist was as usual, while Erfan held a bottle of fruit water and a bag that gave off a strong sweet smell.

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"Hehehe. So they call me Matriarch. But what could this proposal from the proud and lonely La clan be?"

(Don't you mean "isolated and without support"?) Maomao thought about it, but remained silent. The reason Lahan was speaking was because the eccentric strategist had failed to make a proper introduction. It is not normally considered proper for someone to speak on equal terms with a person of higher status.

"For now, why don't we sit down?"

They finally managed to sit down when the matriarch suggested.
It is worth noting that the eccentric strategist was already trying to sit down alone, but Erfan stopped him.

Maomao was the last to sit down, because she was the last in the order. He had no choice but to sit next to the eccentric strategist, although he moved his chair slightly to maintain a slight distance.

(Lahan, I'll definitely get some medicinal herbs or something later)

For Maomao, this was an encounter where she would have to endure a lot.

"So I heard they brought us a wonderful proposal."

The matriarch of the Shin clan was an older woman who still maintained an air of dignity and traces of her former beauty. She was the kind of person Lahan felt comfortable with.

"Would you like it if I told you that I intend to find the family treasure that your clan lost forty years ago?"

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“Hehehehehe.”

The matriarch hid her mouth with her fan, giving a refined laugh. The assistant beside him had a surprised expression.

“Seriously, where did they hear that from? Right now, it’s impossible to find.”

“But, I understand that the previous clan head, your late husband, was looking for you until the day he died. Until three years ago, in fact.”

Lahan spoke in a voice that sounded almost defiant. Maomao noticed that the Shin clan youth's eyebrows twitched slightly.

(Don't tease them too much...)

"It's true. Can you imagine the shame of losing the family treasure during your rule? My husband was very distraught.
He even treated the head of the U clan, his best friend, as a thief, and they broke off their friendship because of the dispute." "It's quite a famous story. He shouted in court that the U clan had robbed him and drew his sword."

I may be saying this lightly, but it was actually a huge scandal. At worst, they could have been executed on the spot.

“It’s embarrassing to admit, but my husband, although a brave man, had a bad temper. So it was a great help to have the head of the U clan, who always calmed him down with his common sense.

The matriarch looked down sadly. Although her hair was completely white, her eyelashes still had a few strands.

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dark.

(The Matriarch of the Shin clan seems to hold some sympathy for the U clan)

However, that was not the opinion of the Shin clan as a whole. The young man beside him stood up.

"Grandma! Why are you defending the U clan? Then where do you think the family treasure is?"

The young man was in his twenties. Just like the Ma clan, the U clan looked like a warrior. He had a strong build. As the grandson of the matriarch, he had a handsome face, but his overall appearance was rough and manly.

“The treasure is lost. Didn’t your grandfather say on his deathbed ‘we won’t look for it anymore’?”

"Mas...!"

"Distension."

The assistant stopped the young man.

(Was it this guy who wrote the love letter?)

Maomao thought about it, but remembered that Yao had said that the sender had not shown up, so he discarded it.

“Regardless of what you think of the U clan, it seems that not everyone has given up on the family’s great treasure,” Lahan commented with deliberate irony.

“Grandma, the La clan offered us help. If we still don’t find it, there will be no remedy. But couldn’t we at least try?”

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“You are a stubborn young man,” the matriarch said, sighing disdainfully.

“What should we do, father?”

"Hum?"

Lahan asked the eccentric strategist. He was chewing on the mahua that Erfan had given him. Even if he finished it, there were nuts on the table, so he would have plenty of time.

"We wasted my father's time, didn't we? We set aside time because they said it was a special request. We even presented it as a request from our side so as not to cause unnecessary inconvenience," Lahan said, shaking his head in apparent disappointment.

"What do you mean?" The matriarch looked at her grandson.

“Because if we don’t do this, we won’t be able to find him!” exclaimed the grandson.

"Was it you who asked them to do this?"

"Yes, that's how it is."

The members of the Shin clan glared at the eccentric strategist. In theory, he was a man who should not be touched. If he had taken the initiative, the situation would have been different, but since the contact came from the Shin clan, things changed.

It is easy to imagine that Lahan approached this grandson of the Shin clan to make the request, and that even though the treasure hunt ended with the death of the previous chief, some were not satisfied with this.
Lahan, with his ability to speak, must have convinced him to make the request.

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Although Lahan looked worried, beneath that thick facade he was certainly smiling in satisfaction.

“Well, if it’s something from forty years ago, even my father might not know some things. But being called and not being able to hear anything about it is really too much. So, could we at least hear the story?”

Maomao was surprised at how well Lahan handled the situation. Although it is said that it was the grandson of the Shin clan who led the conversation, it was probably Lahan who led the invitation.

The Shin clan members had complicated expressions. The assistant and grandson watched the matriarch's face for signs.

“Okay,” the matriarch relented.

“Even if we don’t find the family treasure, there won’t be a problem.”
"That's very generous of you."

"So I'll tell you what my husband always explained, with my own additions."

The matriarch sighed deeply.

ÿ•ÿ

First, let me explain about the family treasure.

The treasure is the figure of a golden dragon holding a pearl.
We use the dragon, an auspicious beast, as a symbol because of the relationship with the character 'ÿ' (Dragon) given to us, which is linked to the origins of our Clan.

The treasure was granted six generations ago. In fact, it was given to the son who descended to the rank of subject, and not directly to our clan.

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“It is said that the crown prince at that time was in poor health and had many brothers. The prince asked his father, the emperor, that it would be better for his more talented brother to ascend the throne instead of him.

However, although the recommended brother was talented, his mother was of low status. The crown prince, in order to avoid conflicts within the court, decided to retire and become a monk, although the emperor did not agree.

The prince's determination was firm, and after several obstacles it was finally decided that he would descend to the rank of subject.

At that time, he was taken as a husband by the Shin clan, which had no direct male heirs.

Although the Crown Prince was in poor health, he was a very intelligent person and the Emperor loved him very much. Although he was no longer a member of the imperial family, the emperor gave him the dragon figure with the pearl as a symbol that he was still his son.

Although he had no inheritance rights, the man in our family carries imperial blood in his veins.

I think this introduction is enough. Now let's look at why we lost our family treasure. Forty years ago, our warehouse burned down. It was a major fire. Thanks to desperate efforts to put it out and heavy rains, the fire did not reach the main house, but most of the items inside the warehouse were burned.

The family treasure, the dragon figurine, was also there. If it had been burned and melted in the fire, there would be nothing left of the treasure, right?

However, my husband stated with certainty that the treasure had not been destroyed. He said that someone had stolen it and pointed to the U clan.

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as the culprit.

The reason is that the head of the U clan was visiting our house just at the time of the fire. The head of the U clan quickly noticed the fire, poured a large amount of water, destroyed a nearby hut, and prevented the fire from spreading.

Thanks to the efforts of the U clan, the fire did not spread to the nearby houses. But my husband, instead of being grateful, accused him of dishonorable behavior.

He said that the U clan acted like a thief in the middle of a fire, that they envied the noble Shin clan and that's why they stole the treasure.

I understand how my husband felt. He wanted to claim that the U clan betrayed us first.

At that time, the U clan belonged to the Empress Dowager's faction, whom we could very well call the "Empress Reigning".
Although he had no right of succession to the throne, my husband was proud of carrying imperial blood and boasted that he had no intention of bowing down to an unknown woman. His attitude was so disdainful that it could be considered an act of rebellion against the emperor's mother.

It is still frightening to remember this today. It is a miracle that our clan was not completely exterminated for incurring the wrath of the Reigning Empress back then.

"Do you understand now why I said there's no need to look for the treasure? I think the treasure was lost along with the warehouse in the fire. Something that melted and disappeared won't just reappear out of thin air."

My husband, not believing my words, continued searching for the treasure and kept telling our children and grandchildren

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that the treasure was somewhere. This led to the break with the U clan.

ÿ•ÿ

The matriarch finished the story and drank the tea slowly. Since there were no servants from Chuu Village in the private meeting room, each other's guards prepared the drink.

(A former imperial family with no succession rights)

Maomao stroked his chin as he looked at the eccentric strategist.

“What’s wrong, Maomao?”

The eccentric strategist immediately noticed Maomao's gaze.

“…”

Maomao considered ignoring the question for a moment, but as the conversation was not progressing, she held back.

“Is there a lie in what we just heard?”

Maomao whispered to the eccentric strategist, struggling to maintain his reserves.

“Lies? Hmmm…”

It seems there were no lies based on the eccentric strategist's reaction. Furthermore, Maomao didn't like how pleased he looked.

Maomao quickly distanced himself from the eccentric strategist.

There have been many worrying things in recent history.

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And Lahan did not let Maomao's expression fade.

“May I interrupt for a moment?” Lahan raised his hand.

"What's wrong?"

“No, it’s not for me, it seems my sister wants to ask some questions.”

Lahan looked at Maomao and winked mischievously.

(This guy…)

Maomao wanted to step on Lahan's toes, but since the eccentric strategist was in the way, he was unable to do so. So instead, he stepped on the eccentric strategist's foot.

“¡¿?!”

The eccentric strategist was about to scream, but upon realizing that it was Maomao who stepped on him, he gave a strange smile.

Maomao ignored him and exhaled deeply.

“So, if you’ll allow me, I’ll take the opportunity to ask you a few questions.”

The things that worried him in recent history were…

"Could you tell me the specific shape of the dragon-shaped object that is a family heirloom?"

“The specific form? Well, the size… it’s easier to draw.”

The assistant passed paper and drawing utensils to the matriarch.
She drew a stunning dragon with ease.

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"You are very talented."

Maomao praised sincerely.

"It's just a hobby."

The dragon drawn was the type of dragon that Maomao had imagined: a long body like a large snake, with two horns. In her clawed front paws she held a jewel and had a mane. If the drawing were to full scale, the dragon would be resting on a base about nine centimeters high.

(It's smaller than I thought)

There didn't seem to be anything strange, except for one point... And if Maomao had noticed, there was no way Lahan wouldn't notice.

“Does the dragon have four claws?”

As Lahan pointed out, the dragon holding the jewel appears to have four claws.

“Yes, that’s right. Under normal circumstances, this number of claws is not allowed to people outside the imperial family, but the emperor at that time loved the crown prince so much that he made an exception. As a vassal, he was still his son. He was also given an amethyst orb.”

Purple is considered the noblest color after yellow.

(The Reigning Empress used to wear yellow clothes, but…)

The noblest color is called kÿtan, a reddish yellow that only the emperor can wear.

“The material of the dragon figure is pure gold, right?”

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“No, I don’t think it’s pure gold; it looks like it’s been mixed with silver.”

Pure gold is soft. It is easy to process, but at the same time it is subject to crushing. Silver is mixed in to increase strength.

Maomao closed his eyes to organize the information in his mind.

(Alloys made from different metals can have a lower melting point. However, this does not seem to be the case with gold and silver as much.)

If the matriarch's words are true, the treasure was lost in the fire and disappeared completely.

"Could you describe again what the fire was like?"

However, the matriarch's grandson got up from his chair.

“Ah, stop it! Grandma, you don’t need to explain anything. Just subdue the U clan and everything will be faster. Let’s go!”

The assistant hit the grandson who was pulling his grandmother's hand.

"Acalmar."

"Yuck!" The grandson held his head.

(Wow, that looks familiar!)

It seems that military clans speak in body language. As if Gaoshun and Basen are in front of Maomao.

"Can I keep talking?"

Lahan asked the matriarch.

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"Move forward."

“So they say…” Lahan turned to Maomao. “What was the cause of the fire?” Maomao, regaining his composure, asked the question.

"Ah..."

“…The fire started in the library lamps.”

"That's it-?"

Maomao, alarmed, held her to his side. The strange strategist suddenly pricked her with his finger.

(What the hell, this guy!)

Maomao really wanted to step on the eccentric strategist's toes, but his monocled eyes shone strangely, as if he wanted to be praised for bringing what they asked for.

(Is he suggesting that Matriarch Shin is lying about the cause of the fire?)

The eccentric strategist narrowed his eyes even further.

He was grateful that she had revealed the lie to him. But because she had pricked him with her finger, he slapped his hand away.

(What are you trying to hide by lying about the cause of the fire?)

Maomao kept this in mind and moved on to the next question.

“How badly did the warehouse burn?”

The matriarch leaned forward, as if trying to remember.

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“It didn’t collapse completely, but it was completely black, and since there were so many books and other flammable objects, there was almost nothing left.”

“No books, no furniture. If there were vases or other objects, would they be intact? No, if they were works of art, they would also have lost their value.
“Were there no swords or armor?”

“In the warehouse there were some swords and armor of artistic value. Furthermore, the linens of previous generations were in a place away from the fire, so I remember that they were stored.”

This did not provoke any reaction from the eccentric strategist.
“Then lastly. He said that the U clan put out the fire, but were they supposed to visit them originally or did they just pass by by chance?”

“The U clan was planning to visit us,” the matriarch replied with her eyes closed.

“So, you knew about the visit in advance?”

“…”

The matriarch's words stopped at Maomao's question.

"...No. It was a sudden visit from the Shin clan.

The way he said it was suspicious. However, since the eccentric strategist didn't react, it probably wasn't a lie.

"Why did they come suddenly?"

“...I assume it was an order from the Regnant Empress. As I mentioned before, the U clan was under her authority. At that time, the Shin clan had just changed leaders, with my husband taking over, and he was still young and impulsive. And although they were not royalty, they held a similar status, so

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the Empress's opponents around him criticized him. So if the U clan came to visit him, you can more or less understand the situation, right?

“Did they come to collect evidence of rebellion?”

"Probably."

The ambiguous way of speaking is probably because everything was lost in the fire.

“Although the family treasures were turned into ashes, I think it was for the best. Considering the power of the Reigning Empress back then, if it weren’t for this, our clan would have already been annihilated. “I only regret that my husband was unable to reconcile with his best friend until the end.” The matriarch wiped a tear with a handkerchief.

“Are you done with the questions?” The grandson asked Maomao, trying hard to use respectful language.

"Sim."

“Did you find out anything?”

"Sim."

"Eh!?"

The unexpected answer surprised not only the grandson, but also the matriarch and the assistant, who widened their eyes.

“Did you really understand any of this?”

“Not everything. There are still some suspicious points.

It seems that Lahan also realized something and nodded. The eccentric strategist watched closely to see if the matriarch was

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lying.

“What are these suspicious points?”

“He said the books were burned, but the swords, armor, and linen were saved. The linen includes bronze mirrors, right?”

"Sim."

The matriarch responded with a surprised expression.

“Then it’s strange.”

“It’s strange.”

Lahan and Maomao looked at each other.

"What exactly is strange?"

The assistant, unusually, spoke. When he spoke, he had an air similar to that of his grandson.

“What happens is that…”

Lahan started to explain, so Maomao decided to leave it to him.

“You said that the dragon statue, which was a family treasure, melted and disappeared. However, it is hard to believe that the fire reached temperatures high enough to melt a gold alloy.”

"W-what do you mean by that?"

“Bronze mirrors are made of copper, right? The melting temperatures of copper and gold are approximately the same.”

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Lahan adjusted his glasses, shining with new understanding. “If the copper mirror didn’t melt, it’s very likely that the gold wouldn’t either. Besides, even if the gold were melted, it wouldn’t disappear. If it were just a simple block of melted gold, it would have fallen somewhere. Since “gold is so valuable, it’s hard to imagine that a melted piece would go uncollected.”

"Is that so?"

The matriarch opened her eyes in surprise. Normally, women from good families should not know the melting temperature of metals; It is not common knowledge. In the case of Maomao and Lahan, knowing this would be an exception, since their parents taught them or acquired this knowledge through their businesses.

“Then where did the family treasure go?” The matriarch’s voice trembled. Maomao could also tell that she was distressed.

“Before that, I need to do some checks,” Maomao said, raising his hand.

"What is it?"

“The U clan suddenly visited the Shin clan’s residence. Right in the middle of the fire, and they put out the fire, correct?”

"Sim."

“After putting out the fire, you meticulously inspected the burned warehouse for evidence of rebellion, didn’t you?”

"Probably."

If they didn't find any evidence, the Reigning Empress wouldn't be able to take action against the Shin clan. But there really wasn't any

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no evidence of rebellion?

"Let's see if there really was evidence."

Maomao took a hairpin from his pocket, with a peculiar design that he had received from the eccentric strategist. With one movement, he tore off the amethyst skull that adorned it.

“Sister, don’t you think destroying a gift in front of the person who gave it to you is a bit rude?”

“Maomao, did you just want the skull? Well then, let’s make a skull necklace next time.”

"Please, do not do that!"

Maomao and Lahan's voices overlapped.

“Look at this,” Maomao said, showing the skull to the matriarch.

“The orb the dragon held, 'Is this amethyst not like the orb the dragon held?'

“Yes, I think the color is the same too.”

The skull that Maomao was holding was a deep purple color. It was a very good quality purple quartz, although Maomao felt that it was not necessary to turn it into a skull.

“So…” Maomao said, looking at the brazier in the corner of the room. It looked like it was used to heat tea, as there was a pot on the fire.

"Could you bring me the brazier, please?"

Maomao asked Erfan, since neither Lahan nor the eccentric strategist were strong enough to move him without risking him falling over.

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"Of course." Erfan carried the brazier with ease.

“Everyone, pay close attention.”

Maomao took a pair of tongs and placed the quartz skull on the burning charcoal, rotating it slowly.

"Oh?"

The color of the ash-covered skull changes rapidly. The dazzling purple, similar to that of wisteria, fades, becomes pale and then acquires a yellowish hue.

"List."

Maomao holds the skull with the tweezers and blows gently. The ash falls away, revealing a deep yellow skull.

“Did it change color?” The grandson’s eyes widened.

"Just as metals melt at high temperatures, gemstones also change color. Amethyst is especially prone to changing color, and just by being exposed to light

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solar loses its blue hue. The color change varies depending on the object, but this one is a stunning yellow. I'm glad it's easy to explain."

Stones are not unchangeable. Many people don't know that.

“Matriarch Shin, “Has your family treasure been shown to an outsider?”

“No, we never displayed our family treasures like this. They were only shown to guests during events like the succession, but when my husband took over, there was a fire before that could happen.”

Despite this, some may have misinterpreted the situation.

"It is not uncommon for a clan that is not part of the imperial family to possess a statue of a four-clawed dragon. And if they also had an orb of deep yellow, a noble color that evokes 'hÿtan'... it would be natural to regard that as evidence of an intent to rebel."

"C-could this just be a coincidence?" The grandson's face turned pale.

“So if the family treasures survived the fire, wouldn’t evidence of rebellion have been found and our clan would have already been punished by the Reigning Empress?”

Maomao thought this was true. However, if it wasn't, then someone must have stolen them.

Maomao looked at the matriarch.

“After talking this far, I think you already have an idea of who took the family treasures, right, Matriarch Shin?”

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“...Yes,” the matriarch confirmed with a nod, as if she were confessing something.

"Grandpa?"

The grandson was confused and blinked repeatedly.

“Wasn’t that the person who told you? That the U clan would come visit us.”

“It wasn’t that person, but I think it’s more or less what you imagine.”

Maomao takes a deep breath.

“...No, the Shin clan considered the U clan’s visit too sudden.”

The way he expressed himself seemed suspicious. (For the Shin clan, the visit was sudden, but…)

“So, Matriarch Shin, you knew in advance about the U clan’s visit, right?”

"Sim."

Furthermore, she had seen her husband curse the Reigning Empress. It was understandable that she feared being accused of rebellion due to her husband's actions.

“You thought any false evidence could come to light to accuse them of rebellion, didn’t you?”

And if any evidence was hidden, burning the warehouse would be the best option.

“The cause of the fire was… the library’s lamps.”

The strange strategist realized that this was a lie.

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(That means...)

“So, Matriarch Shin, upon hearing about the U clan’s visit, set fire to the warehouse to destroy the evidence?”

The grandson suddenly stood up with a bang.

“What are you saying?! There’s no way my grandmother would do something like that!”

“Keep your voice down!” The assistant tried to calm her grandson down, but he seemed a little upset.

“No…” the matriarch said, looking at Maomao “That’s right. I was the one who set fire to the warehouse.” The matriarch nodded firmly at Maomao’s question.

Chapter 4: Rabbits and Dragons

The matriarch's confession left the young man and his assistant in a state of evident discontent.

"What does that mean, Mom? Explain!" The assistant, who had been so calm, raised his voice, revealing that he was apparently the old woman's son.

"Grandma... this must be a joke, right?" The grandson, on the other hand, could barely articulate the words, now in a much lower tone.

Faced with the family's reaction, the matriarch simply shook her head.

“If anyone betrayed the Shin clan, it is me and no one else.” The matriarch tilted her head, avoiding eye contact.

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“Could you tell us what really happened forty years ago?” Maomao asked in a serious tone.

“Yes,” the matriarch replied, nodding her head.

"Indeed. Then why don't you sit down before we continue?"
Thanks to Lahan's intervention, the grandson and the assistant managed to regain their composure and sat back in their chairs.

“So...” The matriarch began to speak slowly.

“Just as my husband was a close friend of the U clan head, I was also a close friend of his wife.” The matriarch adopted a nostalgic expression as she recalled the past.

"We both married into renowned families, which probably brought us together because we shared similar concerns. We used to have tea parties often."

While everyone listened attentively, only the eccentric strategist was distracted, eating thorns on a skewer. He had already devoured several, and Erfan was in charge of collecting the metal bars after each one.

"My husband was a passionate man, and his constant clash with the Reigning Empress's faction alienated us. My friend, whose husband supported the empress, and I had to cut back on the number of letters and even stop our tea parties. We deeply regret how our clans split apart, and the tension between the Shin clan and the U clan grew due to our different political allegiances."

The matriarch bowed her face and also covered herself with her fan, which made it impossible to read her expression.

"My husband was a man of integrity. He could never have had a good opinion of a reigning Empress accused of murdering his

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imperial family to put his own son on the throne. His loyalty to the imperial family caused him to have very strong convictions.
However, the Empress's political talent was considered the best in recent generations. She understood that the U clan supported her for the good of the country."

(The assassination of the imperial family is just a rumor) Maomao decided to remain silent, thinking that it would be in bad taste to correct at this time.

The matriarch seemed to understand both points of view. For that reason, perhaps he could not oppose the U and Shin clans going their separate ways.

"The Empress Regnant, even after her son, the previous emperor, ascended the throne, continued to punish those who opposed her. The Shin clan, being a collateral branch of the imperial family, was probably difficult to punish even for her. And that was when the Empress Regnant's opponents tried to elevate my husband as their leader."

There are always people who prefer not to be on the front line and look for someone else to put on the pedestal.

"The men of the Shin clan were furious and the women lived in fear. In my anxiety, I confided my worries to her."

"You mean the wife of the U clan head?" Lahan asked, as if to confirm.

"Yes. I didn't receive any response from her. She also had her own problems. It was impossible for her to meet with someone who had become her political rival. So when she had already given up hope, she came to see me secretly."

The matriarch let out a long sigh.

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“With the command of the Reigning Empress, the U clan would conduct an inspection. If they found any evidence of rebellion, we might be annihilated,” the matriarch explained.

"So...! You guys are the ones who started the fire in the warehouse?" The grandson approached his grandmother, demanding answers.

“Yes, your grandfather used to hide important letters in the basement archive. Even if we had no intention of rebelling, if these invitation letters were found, our clan would be destroyed. I didn’t know the exact location.”

Therefore, the matriarch opted for drastic measures and set fire to the warehouse.

"So... you were the one who stole the family treasure, Grandma?"

"That's not right." Muhammad responded in place of the matriarch.

“Matriarch Shin thought that the treasure items had melted and disappeared.” Most importantly, the eccentric strategist confirmed that there was no lie in his words.

“So where did the treasure disappear to?!” The grandson still didn’t understand, but the matriarch had understood long ago.

“Why did the U clan join the Empress Regnant’s faction? How was the U clan head’s wife able to share that secret mission from the empress with me? She stole the treasure, but now he understands her motive thanks to the young lady’s words.” The matriarch gave a slight smile.

“The head of the U clan pretended to be on the side of the Reigning Empress in order to protect our clan. Otherwise, he would not have been able to leak a secret mission from the Empress, nor would he have taken the dragon statuette, which could have been used as evidence of treason. If he

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If he were truly loyal to the empress, he would have handed over the figure as proof."

“Are you saying that the head of the U clan stole the figure?”

“In a way, the head of the U clan was a great person. Despite being at the top of the family, he carried out espionage maneuvers by betraying the most powerful person in the country.” Maomao sincerely expressed his admiration.

"Did you know that, Grandma? Is that why you defended the U clan...?"
But why didn't you tell my grandfather?" The matriarch shook her head at her grandson's question.

“Your grandfather was stubborn, and if he had mentioned anything, there would have been a risk of the Reigning Empress finding out. It was only after the Empress’s death, when your grandfather was already bedridden and remembered the past with nostalgia, that I was finally able to talk about it.” The matriarch spoke softly to her grandson.

When the previous head of the Shin clan said that they should no longer search for the treasure, it was because he knew the truth.

“Your grandfather was hurt. He believed that the head of the U clan was someone with principles, not the type to bow down to the powerful. He said that he couldn’t bear to see him become a mere follower of the empress. On one occasion, they decided to confront…”

“He said he wanted to fight and be able to tell each other everything they thought.”

Maomao thought this was impossible. If they were children, perhaps, but if two clan leaders fought, it would amount to a civil war.

(Although there are exceptions) He glanced sideways at the eccentric strategist, who was still eating thorns. It was hard to understand how

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someone who blew up a wall to enter the palace and avoided a duel with monetary compensation was still standing there as if nothing had happened.

“Maybe my husband accused the U clan of stealing the treasure just to provoke a fight.” He wanted to fight and then make peace, just like old times.

"But you didn't respond to his provocation, right?"

"That's how it is."

It wasn't so much a conflict as it was a one-sided fight. The former Shin clan head continued to seek confrontations with his friend in order to reconcile, while the U clan head remained silent to protect him.

It was a twisted and awkward friendship.

"So, we..."

"Yes. You continued to spit on those who truly deserved your gratitude."

The grandson fell into the chair, dejected.

"What we are saying are mere assumptions. They are not necessarily the truth."

It could be that someone from the U clan had stolen the treasure for money, and if so, it would have been melted down long ago.

He couldn't take responsibility for that.

“Ehmm...” A voice was heard beside him.

The eccentric strategist leaned across the table and turned his head from side to side,

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clearly bored after finishing all the sweets. He looked longingly at the

last remaining thorn.

"If you're so worried, you should just take a look, don't you think?" The eccentric strategist looked at the wall of the room.

"Check what?"

Maomao didn’t understand what he was talking about. He pulled back the fabric covering the soundproof wall. Behind it was a small room with several people sitting.

"What's this?! You can hear the whole conversation from here!"

"What does this mean?"

The assistant looked at Lahan.

"Oh, right... that..."

“Lahan snapped his fingers in an exaggerated manner.

“Ah, that’s right! We also agreed to meet with the U clan!”

Maomao glared at the curly-haired, bespectacled man who was so interested in her.

exasperated

"In the same room? And purposefully allowing them to hear our conversation?"

(What was I thinking?)

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It was unclear whether they had actually resolved the issue with the Shin clan, and now it seemed they might have ignited a new spark of conflict.

"Well, let's get them in."

At Lahan's signal, the people who had been listening to the conversation in the small room began to enter.

“We thought the La clan would never arrive… So that was the plan.”

The head of the U clan, probably Lishu’s grandfather, looked visibly exasperated. They had heard that he was ill, and as they said, he had a body as thin as a dry twig, with a long beard hanging down his face. He was sitting in a wheelchair, pushed by a middle-aged woman.

“I am very sorry for the lack of respect, my apologies. It was an order to keep everything secret.”

The head of the U clan entered the room without getting up from his wheelchair.

“Yes, I thought this would be the perfect time to settle old grudges, so I tried a drastic measure.” Lahan, with a suspicious smile on his face, bowed deeply.

The matriarch followed Lahan’s example, rising from her chair and bowing her head. Her grandson, for his part, seemed indignant at being spied on, but when the assistant grabbed him by the shoulders, he had no choice but to obey in silence.

"I thank you for what you did forty years ago."

“What are you talking about…? Maybe my wife has entered the wrong place,” the head of the U clan replied, feigning ignorance, which made Maomao find him difficult to deal with. “Ah, I remembered that

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we had something stored and I decided to return it," said the assistant, pushing the rolling chair while taking something out from under it. The package was small, but it seemed quite heavy.

"Please take this."

He placed it on the table and opened it. Inside was a magnificent figure of a golden dragon.

(Oh dear!)

Maomao, being who he was, could not help but calculate how much it would be worth if it were sold. Lahan was probably also calculating the numbers in his head. From its size and shape, it can be deduced that, in metal alone, it had considerable value. And if crafting was added, it could be worth enough to build a mansion or two.

However, the most shocking thing was that the dragon had four claws and was holding a reddish-yellow pearl.

Clan Chief U's eyes seemed to be filled with tears.

"I didn't realize how ignorant I was. I didn't pay enough attention to that much-touted gem. When I first saw it that day, I thought the cheating rumors were true and felt disturbed."

The head of the U clan showed his palms, which had old burn marks, as if he had held something very hot. The image of the U clan's head grabbing the dragon figure, which had been exposed to fire and was burning hot, appeared in Maomao's mind.

The four-clawed dragon holding the reddish-yellow pearl. If someone had found it and reported it to the Reigning Empress, the Shin clan would probably have disappeared. The head of the

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U clan took out the dragon figure while it was still warm and hid it.

"He wanted to return it while he was still alive. At the same time, he was afraid that if he returned it, he might try to accuse them again. He knew that although he despised the Empress Regnant, he deeply respected the imperial family more than anyone else."

Perhaps he agreed to carry out the inspection because he was confident there would be no evidence of treason.

“When I meet him in the other world, he’ll probably give me a good beating for rushing in.” “No, knowing him, perhaps he’ll be the one to kneel down and apologize. Though he’ll certainly scold me for rushing in. After all, I did burn the treasury along with the wine cellar,” the matriarch said with a smile, as a single tear fell from her eyes.

“I-is this our family treasure?”

The grandson looked at the dragon figure. The assistant, who was probably also seeing it for the first time, blinked repeatedly.

They were both moved, but it was also clear from their faces that with a treasure like this, it was natural for them to suspect a rebellion.

“Even if the family treasure has returned, we will not be able to display it publicly.”

"That's right. Although the story of how we received the figure is recorded in a document, which also mentioned the number of claws, that document was also burned."

The matriarch spoke with an uncomfortable expression.

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“It’s not just the figure itself, but the number of claws and the sphere can be problematic.”

“So, we just need to figure out the claws and the sphere, right?” The one who suddenly interrupted was the eccentric strategist.

“Do you have any ideas in mind?” asked the head of the U clan, distancing himself from the eccentric strategist. How much damage has he already caused?

"Do you have something in mind?"

The U clan members retreated slightly, keeping their distance from the strategist. How much trouble had this man caused by now?

“You just need to get rid of the claws and the pearl, right?”

The eccentric strategist picked up the last remaining thorn on the metal spike he held. Then, without hesitation, he thrust the skewer between the dragon figure's fingers.

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“……”

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The sudden action left everyone unable to react in time. As a result, the eccentric strategist tilted the tip with a quick movement. An unpleasant noise was heard. The scene was so absurd that no one could understand what had just happened. It was hard to believe that gold could break so easily.

The dragon's thin claw, which was holding the pearl, broke cleanly, dropping the yellow pearl and rolling across the table.
"There," said the eccentric strategist, as he placed the last remaining red thorn in place of the pearl the dragon held. A thin thread of candy stretched from her fingers to her figure.

Time seemed to stop.

What was a moving scene just a moment ago disappeared in an instant. The matriarch's eyes, which had been moist until then, instantly dried up.
The assistant and his grandson opened their mouths so wide it looked like their jaws were going to dislocate.

The U clan members also widened their eyes in disbelief at what they had just witnessed.

Lahan, for his part, looked completely devastated. Everything had gone according to plan... until this moment. It felt like his soul had been consumed like ash. For a moment, Maomao even thought he saw a crack in his glasses, as if they had shattered in midair.

The guards were also unable to move. No one could have imagined that in the midst of this situation, someone would dare to destroy the family treasure.

Therefore, the first to react was Mohammed.

"What the hell are you doing, idiot?!"

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Maomao, without caring about the gaze of others, kicked the eccentric strategist. The man, who had no physical ability, flew spectacularly.

Under normal circumstances, such rude behavior would be unthinkable, but no one reprimanded Maomao. In fact, perhaps some thought he should have done more.

Lahan made a miscalculation.

The eccentric strategist is not someone who can be included in plans.

He always ruins everything.

He was a man born under a star destined to destroy.

Chapter 5: The Gong That Resonates in the Heart Never include the eccentric strategist in your plans.

Even with this wise lesson in mind, sometimes there is nothing that can be done.

Lahan, completely expressionless, seemed to have more messy strands of hair than usual. Maomao, although she thought she had brought this on herself, had some sympathy for the Shin and U clans, who had seen their heartwarming moment destroyed before their eyes.

"Why did you kick me?"

The eccentric strategist didn't fully understand what had happened. Erfan only caressed his abdomen where he had received the kick. Having to comfort a man over forty years old... what a poor guy.

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(Whatever...)

Perhaps the only positive thing in all of this was that the family treasure was destroyed in a way that could be repaired.

“The truth is that we were thinking of destroying it to avoid problems in the future,” said the matriarch, which helped save the situation. Finally, they decided to replace the pearl and rebuild the dragon with three claws.

Lahan, at the very least, decided to apologize by introducing a trusted craftsman known for his high skill and discretion. However...

"Ha ha ha! Well, let's talk about the future now."

Lahan wanted to gain the favor of the Shin and U clan. He was determined to strengthen ties and perhaps make a business proposition to them.

“No, we will return to the banquet hall.”

"That's right, me too."

“Yes, we still have to interact with other families.”

The matriarch and head of the U clan looked cold and distant. Not only them, even their servants watched them from afar with reservation.

Maomao glanced sideways.

"Don't you have any candy?"

"Master Lakan, please wait a little longer." The eccentric strategist, still stroking his abdomen, asked for more sweets, while Erfan gently scolded him.

Lahan, his glasses fogged up, looked defeated.

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“Hey,” Maomao pushed him discreetly.

"Didn't you say you would do them a favor so you could negotiate with them?"

If he couldn't gain the favor of the Shin clan, he wouldn't be able to solve Yao's problem.

"I know, I know, but..."

Lahan pulled his hair. It wasn’t a nice gesture, but it seemed like he couldn’t hold back any longer.

(This is not going well...)

Maomao thought about what to do and decided that it would be best to return to the banquet hall.

Upon returning, the La clan's round table was filled with noise. As he approached, he noticed that Lahan's eldest brother was arguing with an unknown man. Behind the eldest brother were Yao and En'en.

“I have unfinished business with Yao. “You have no business here.”

"What do you mean, 'you have nothing to do'? My name is—!"

"Yao, please meet my family."

The man pushed Lahan’s brother away and tried to hold Yao’s hand. The two remaining guards watched suspiciously, but the man did not hesitate.

Maomao immediately understood who the man was.

(So this is the guy from the love letters...)

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He definitely gave off an atmosphere that indicated he didn't understand social cues. He didn't want to get close to him.

"What are you doing?"

Lahan intervened, although he seemed a little hesitant. However, at least he mustered up the courage to speak.

“Don’t you see?”

With Lahan's arrival, there was only one more weak man on the scene.
The boy with the love letter didn't seem interested in talking to him.

(At this point, what is needed is...)

An insect repellent, but the eccentric strategist did not return.
At this moment, he was stopping a servant who was carrying dishes and stealing the sweets from the tray. Erfan watched helplessly as the strategist did so.

(This is not going well...)

While Maomao was thinking about what to do, a lifeguard appeared.

“What’s going on here?”

The firm voice was that of the matriarch of the Shin clan.

"Great-aunt, long time no see!"

The boy with the love letter bowed before the matriarch. By calling her “great-aunt,” it was clear that this man was not a direct member of the Shin clan, but rather a collateral relative.

"I don't need any greetings. You're late and you look like you're in the middle of an argument. What's the reason?"

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(Late huh)

At first, he heard that the guy in the love letter wouldn't be there, so he relaxed.

"I'm not late. I was just talking to like-minded friends."

He said something that sounded plausible, but in Maomao's experience, this kind of person who spoke so blatantly was usually troublesome.

"More importantly, I want to introduce you to a woman who might interest you. "Here you go," the boy in the love letter said, his eyes shining with excitement as he introduced Yao.

"Her name is Yao and although her family is not from a noble family, her uncle is Vice Minister Lu. I think her bloodline is enough to make her a wife in our family."

It was frightening how he explained it without any hesitation. The matriarch's assistant and grandson looked away, clearly aware of the love postman's lack of common sense, even though he was from his own family. "When you talk about marriage, does that young lady agree?"

The matriarch did not direct her gaze at the boy, but at Yao and the others.

"This man is speaking on his own. I have no intention of getting married yet," Yao replied firmly.

Any other young girl might have cringed in this situation, but clarity of speech was both a strength and a weakness of Yao's.

"Her opinion doesn't matter. Her family and ours are suitable, so we just need to talk to her parents about it.

AND

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That's it. That's how things work for women, right?"

The boy in the love letter spoke without any hesitation.

Yao's face stiffened and En'en looked like he was about to take out a hidden weapon from his robe. This kind of personality was exactly what Yao hated the most.

However, in Li, these types of arranged marriages mentioned by the boy in the love letter were common. For commoners perhaps not, but for a young lady from a good family like Yao, no one usually asked her opinion.

Even so, the boy in the love letters was not acting honorably.

(He is trying to take advantage of his parents' absence)

"I heard what you said. Trying to establish an agreement while your protector, your uncle, is not present is, without a doubt, despicable behavior."

It was Lahan’s elder brother who expressed what Maomao meant. He had always been a shield for Yao and the others. Although he had only been pushed into this, he was determined to fulfill his role to the end. His gentle nature was evident.

"There's your mother, right?"

"Mom? If you don't respect women's opinions yourself, do you think you could treat his mother with the respect she deserves?"

Lahan's elder brother said this without hesitation.

(Very good! Keep it up!)

Maomao didn't want to get involved anymore, so she stood a little apart, supporting him mentally.

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"A stranger should not intervene."

As much as Lahan's brother was right, this discussion seemed to be leading them to a dead end.

“You clearly misunderstood,” the matriarch said, her expression one of clear disdain.

“If you really wanted to introduce me to someone, you should have followed the proper procedure. Without the consent of both families, there can be no marriage.”

It seemed that even within the Shin clan, the boy from the love letters was not well regarded. The cold gazes from his own people confirmed this.

“But Yao’s father has already passed away. What would be the harm in her marrying me, considering what would be best for her and her mother?”

The blatant way he said it, full of contradictions, was nauseating. Even Lahan, who preferred to stay out of it, looked at him with contempt.

(You are probably thinking that these methods are not worth it)

Lahan was always a man of principles and despised those who did not follow them.

“Hahaha,” Lahan was noisy.

"What's so funny to you?!"

“Oh, I thought those words sounded like a man who is not attractive to women.”

"How dare you?!"

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The boy in the love letter was huffing in anger, which was understandable, but the strange thing was that even Lahan's older brother looked furious, his eyes bloodshot. Apparently, Lahan didn't just anger the boy in the love letter, but also those who had nothing to do with it.

The guards quickly approached Lahan, but he stopped them with a slight gesture.

“You said it’s about bloodline and nobility. Certainly, the Shin clan is a prestigious family among the prominent ones. It can’t be compared to the La clan, which has a relatively short history.
More..."

Lahan looked at the boy with the love letter, even though he was taller than him.

“I’m just a rookie, and I’m usually used to doing tasks in various departments. But since you speak so confidently about marrying Officer Lu’s niece, I assumed that your name would be recognized. But could you tell me your name?”

(Wow, how sarcastic)

Lahan had an excellent memory for names, especially if the person was competent, even in other departments. So if he didn't remember, something was wrong.

“This guy talks a lot about his noble family, but it seems like they didn’t even give him a name,” Lahan’s older brother muttered.
Then he stopped, as if hurt by his own words, placing his hand on his forehead.

"What?! Are you making fun of my name?"

The boy in the love letter turned red with anger and glared at Lahan's older brother.

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(He seems more bothered by not being given a name than by being called unattractive to women.)

The boy in the love letter has changed targets, completely changing from Lahan to his older brother.

"Do you know who I am?"

(I have no idea)

The boy clenched his fist tightly and lunged to hit Lahan’s older brother. The guards stood between them, doing their jobs as they should, which was comforting.

"STOP NOW!" The matriarch's firm voice echoed through the room.

"But he insulted me...!"

"He only told the truth!" The matriarch was not tolerant either. His expression clearly said, “Stop embarrassing our family any further.”

"What's going on here?"

A familiar voice was heard behind them. Turning around, Maomao saw Basen and Maamei, the brothers of the Ma clan.

(Wow, some more intense characters...)

Maomao took the opportunity to nibble on some of the food on the table, while Lahan sat quietly and ate as well. Despite having incurred the love mailman’s wrath directed at his brother, he seemed to feel no remorse.

“It looks like they’re in trouble.” Maamei walked over, pretending to be an impartial observer, but her hawk-like eyes had already found their target.

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(This reminds me of Empress Gyokuyou)

Empress Gyokuyou would always become excited whenever an incident occurred, her eyes shining with curiosity. There was no better entertainment than other people’s troubles.

The boy from the love letters, with no allies in sight, not even the matriarch at his side, seemed desperate to attract new viewers.

“This man insulted me! You, being part of the Ma clan, a family of warriors, should know what to do in a situation like this, right?”

Apparently he knew Basen by sight, although due to the coldness between them, it seemed like they were nothing more than acquaintances or work colleagues, far from being friends.

"...A duel." Basen responded with complete seriousness.

“A duel!?” Yao gaped, clearly alarmed. “This is outrageous!” Yao looked back and forth between Lahan and Basen, seeking support.

“If both parties request it, it’s totally cool. Besides, we have a training camp available,” Basen replied with the same seriousness. He’s always been like that: a warrior’s brain.

As usual, Lahan's older brother was having troubles that weren't his fault, but both Lahan and Basen remained calm. Maomao decided to remain just a spectator for now.

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When Basen mentioned the word “duel,” the boy in the love letter showed a triumphant smile.

"A duel, huh? I like the idea. Even if you keep insulting me, who are you? You sit at La's table like it's the most natural thing in the world, but I've never seen you before!"

Of course, the boy had never seen Lahan's older brother.
After all, he spent most of his time growing sweet potatoes in his village, without setting foot in the palace.

“This man has nothing to do with this! He’s just a humble farmer!” Yao stepped forward to protect his older brother.

(This is counterproductive, completely counterproductive...)

Maomao thought as he continued eating the skewer, savoring the tender and perfectly seasoned meat.

"Farmer? A peasant?" The boy with the love letter smiled mockingly.

"A peasant, huh. What's a peasant doing here? Ah, I see, it's to be expected of the eccentric La clan."

"How rude! He makes delicious sweet potatoes!" Before she knew it, Maomao spoke out loud.

The completely shocked matriarch seemed unable to say a word, as her assistant stepped forward.

"Stop it! The fact that they didn't give you a name is because the problem is with you. Don't think for a second that you'll be the heir until you understand this!"

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“Ugh...” The boy from the love letter gritted his teeth, clearly irritated.

Just when it seemed like everything would calm down, it was Lahan's older brother who stepped forward.

"Wait a minute."

"What is happening?"

“This guy insulted me. If I stand still now, what will happen to my dignity?”

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"In that case, I'll apologize."

The assistant tried to lower his head, but Lahan's older brother shook his head.

"This guy made a fool of me. You have no reason to apologize. While we're at it, how about we settle this here and now? If that man defeats me, the La's will not interfere with his marriage plans. But if I win, he will have to give up Yao forever."

"That's what I wanted to hear. You're a real man!" The boy in the love letter smiled, clearly delighted by the idea.

The assistant exchanged a worried look with the matriarch, not knowing what to do. Maomao, for his part, continued to look around as he ate the skewer.

Yao was visibly nervous, while En'en, although showing a somewhat tense expression, continued to observe her attentively. The matriarch, in turn, had an exasperated expression, as did her grandson.

Lahan remained completely calm, as did Basen, who observed everything as if it had nothing to do with him. Maamei, like Maomao, analyzed the situation with curiosity.

The boy in the love letter, upon learning that his opponent was a “peasant,” looked at him with utter contempt. What was unexpected was the attitude of Lahan’s older brother, who shrugged his shoulders and seemed surprisingly enthusiastic about the duel.

“I will stop him immediately,” the matriarch offered.

“No, don’t worry,” Lahan rejected the offer.

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“Apparently, this young man also caused trouble for Shin.
Either way, there will be no repercussions for La.”

After all, the La clan had a reputation for being full of eccentrics. No matter what they did, people would just think, Oh, there they go again.

(I wonder how this will end)

Meanwhile, the eccentric strategist was snoring loudly in the corner of the room. He wasn't much help, as usual.

They say that in some places fighting and arson are considered entertainment... or at least that's what Maomao heard. Therefore, it was not uncommon for people to gather as spectators.
This time, the group moved from the banquet hall to the courtyard.
There was a space that looked like a training ground and spectators completely surrounded it.

"Wow, that's really unexpected. Shin vs. La, huh?"

“They say the La family has many eccentric geniuses, but does that young man have any fighting talent?”

The voices of the crowd could be heard clearly. While the young people seemed restless, the older ones watched with a more relaxed attitude. Apparently, it was not uncommon for noble families to have this kind of confrontation.

(No wonder they have a training camp here) Maomao understood the situation.

“Lahan, elder brother, what kind of weapon do you prefer? What length of hoe do you think is best?”

Maomao asked Lahan's elder brother.

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"What a hoe or something!"

"The duel will be fought with swords or wooden sticks. Sharp weapons are prohibited." Lahan brought several swords and wooden sticks, all prepared for the confrontation.

“The tips are covered with cloth,” En'en noted, inspecting the weapons.

"Of course we don't want our young players to end up dead. Although... even in training, accidents sometimes happen."

“Hmm, with this it’s unlikely he’ll die,” Lahan’s older brother commented calmly.

“Are you sure about this? Have you learned how to use a sword?”

"Well, more than teaching me, my grandfather used to constantly beat me with a sword. He said it was training, but in reality it was more of a punishment."

Maomao remembered meeting Grandpa once. He was a man who resented the eccentric strategist for taking away his position as clan chief, to the point of having kidnapped him in the past.
Frankly, he wasn’t someone she remembered well. “I heard your grandfather was quite famous for his swordsmanship, but as a master… he left a lot to be desired,” Lahan commented, spreading his arms and sighing at the memory.

It was clear that Lahan and his grandfather did not get along.

"Okay, okay. Could you explain the rules to me? I think no eye attacks or low blows are allowed, right?"

"Correct. The rules are simple: if you incapacitate your opponent, stop him, or make him drop his weapon, the fight is over. And yes, attacks on

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eyes or sensitive areas are prohibited."

“So if you’re injured but don’t fall, the fight continues?”

"Technically yes, but the usual thing is to stop him and inform the opponent of the difference in skills. But it hurts a lot more than anything."
Lahan said it like it was none of his business.

"What will you do if you lose?"

“It’s okay if I lose, right?” Lahan's elder brother calmly answered Maomao's question, making sure that Yao and En'en heard him as well.

"Yao, En'en, the truth is, I don't know you very well. But I didn't like what that guy said at all, and I think he's wrong. That's why I'm here, doing this kind of duel. It's my pride. I have no intention of losing, but, well, I'm not a military officer or a swordsman. I just want you to understand this."

“I understand,” Yao said, somewhat embarrassed. It was unusual to see her so shy.

“Brother, you agreed to a duel even though you’ve never done anything like it?

Lahan asked curiously and Maomao nodded, waiting for the answer.

"Come on, this is nothing. It's worse to be attacked by a mob of bandits or hungry thieves. Fighting someone who has no intention of killing me, and in a duel with rules... it's a relief!"

It seemed like the adventures of Lahan's older brother in the West could make for quite an interesting book. "Anyway, Yao, En'en, don't worry if I miss it. I saw Basen for

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here a while ago. Neither he nor the Ma clan would allow something so unjust to happen. I'm sure Basen will."

"Why do you think that?" En'en asked curiously.

“Well, I have exchanged letters with Basen’s older brother from time to time. I don’t talk to Basen much, but as you can see, he is someone who does not tolerate injustice. And in families like that “They tend to take good care of themselves.”

Lahan’s older brother had been in the western capital. The fact that he got along with Baryou was surprising, but perhaps they had bonded over their brothers.

"You're right. If the Ma clan is involved, we can retreat without any problems. Also, I'll speak to Matriarch Shin, just in case."

“Wow, I thought you weren’t looking forward to this,” Maomao joked, teasing Lahan a little.

"You have to do what you're asked to do. That's being an adult."

"An adult, eh?"

Maomao turned his gaze to the eccentric strategist. Although he had appeared to be asleep a moment ago, he now had a privileged seat prepared in the area where the duel would take place.

“Maomao, let’s watch from here.”

Apparently, Erfan was in charge of bringing in the table and chairs. The strategist's nannies are not only Onsou and Rikuson, but also other subordinates.

"That's it. No matter if I win or lose, I won't be too depressed, so neither will you," said the eldest brother.

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from Lahan as he picked up a wooden stick the same length as a hoe and headed to the center of the courtyard.

Maomao and the others sat on the chairs that Erfan had prepared.

The one acting as judge seemed to be from the Ma clan. He was a man in his thirties whom Maomao did not know. Maamei was waving at him.

Basen and a few other men surrounded Lahan's older brother and the boy in the love letter, ready to intervene if anything went wrong. While Lahan's older brother readied himself with his staff, the boy in the love letter held a wooden sword.

“In the Shin clan, they often train with swords,” Lahan commented, pecking at some fruits. Maomao was also enjoying some cherries.

“From the length of the weapon, it seems that Lahan’s older brother has an advantage,” Yao observed carefully.

“It’s about to begin,” one of the judges said, raising his hand. Lahan’s older brother positioned himself in what looked like a fighting stance, more or less.

The boy in the love letters, in turn, had a firm posture, clearly instructed in the art of the sword.

"To start!"

When the judge lowered his hand, it was the boy from the love letter who attacked first. Lahan's older brother parried the wooden sword with his staff, tilting it slightly to deflect the blow and stepping back at the same time.

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Even though the weapons were covered with cloth, the sound of the blows was impressive.

Maomao didn’t know much about swordsmanship, but from his vantage point, it looked like Lahan’s older brother was being cornered. I watched him pace around the yard, always backing away.

"Will everything be okay?" Yao asked Lahan worriedly.

"I don't know. Asking me about martial arts doesn't make much sense," Lahan replied, without much interest. He was right, I wasn't the right person to answer that.

“Yao, that wasn’t the best question. Hey, your glasses, what do you see?”

Maomao asked Lahan directly, albeit in his usual nonchalant tone.

“Well, it’s just my amateur opinion, but… I think my brother has some fighting ability. Although it looks like he’s being pressured, he’s not making any useless moves. He’s received good basic training as part of a warrior clan.”

“So, Lahan’s elder brother will lose?” “Maomao! Don’t say such unlucky things,” Yao protested angrily.

But Lahan's older brother was just defending himself and couldn't fight back. If he didn't attack soon, he would end up getting hit sooner or later.

“Ah!”

The wooden sword struck Lahan’s older brother’s stomach, and his body was sent flying to the side. He slid across the ground, leaving a trail as he struggled to stand.

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"Ha! After all, you're just a peasant. You don't know how to fight. You should know your place and dedicate yourself to working the land."

"And what's wrong with being a peasant?"

Lahan's older brother reassembled his staff, preparing for the next attack.

"It seems like a good idea."

"I'm sorry, but I'm very stubborn."

His voice was calm. There was no trace of fear or nervousness, he looked as usual.

"Wow, how interesting..."

The eccentric strategist muttered, scattering traces of dust from the sweets he ate. Behind his dirty monocle, his fox-like eyes carefully followed the two's every move.

The fight followed the same pattern. Lahan's older brother was being pushed around, while the boy from the love letter attacked.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

"STOP RUNNING AND FIGHTING!"

"END THIS!"

From the crowd, some cheers and boos could be heard. Most of them were young voices, and the boy with the love letter smiled at them, as if they were friends.

Lahan's older brother continued to defend, blow after blow, while the boy in the love letter attacked without stopping. But

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the eccentric strategist watched closely. Lahan was also looking at him carefully.

"Do you think my brother is a dangerous guy?" "He's not dangerous, but he's been through some tough situations. Why do you ask?" Maomao returned the question.

“For some time now, your movements haven’t changed. Instead, your opponent’s numbers keep falling.”

Could he be referring to Lahan's older brother's movements? He didn't look tired at all, while the boy from the love letters looked a little tired.

“That’s right, that ugly man’s vigor has diminished,” Yao commented.

Not that the boy in the love letter was ugly, but perhaps Yao found him more unpleasant than anyone else.

And suddenly, control of the duel changed.

The boy in the love letter looked nervous. Frustration and exhaustion made his attacks more clumsy. Lahan’s older brother seized the opportunity and deflected the blow, thrusting his bat forward.

The boy in the love letter groaned and doubled over as Lahan’s older brother thrust the cane into his side. He spat out a mouthful of saliva, his eyes widened, and his body flew out.

It might be an exaggeration to say he flew, but his movement was so sudden that it made it clear how strong Lahan's older brother's blow was.

The love postman fell to the ground, spitting out foam and saliva, but still seemed conscious.

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"Do you want to continue the fight?" The judge asked the boy about the love letter.

“I… haven’t lost yet!” The boy clung to the gun, even though he coughed and spluttered. Maomao looked at him with a little more respect. At least he had courage.

"Okay then, let's continue."

Lahan's elder brother once again assumed a posture that looked like a farmer ready to dig.

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"Hey, peasant! Don't get excited just because you got it right. I'll hit you until you drop, twenty or thirty times!"

The boy in the love letter was wiping his mouth.

“Ah, don’t worry about holding back. If you hit me, I might not be able to withstand a hundred blows, but I can take about thirty.
In fact, I think you could hit me five more times before that happens. I'm glad you're not having it. "Oh, really."

Lahan's older brother smiled carefreely.

“Don’t you think that’s strange, sister?”

Lahan looked at Maomao with a doubtful expression.

“I always thought he was strong in the face of adversity, but right now it seems like he’s reached his limit. I don’t know, the numbers are normal, but in a situation like this, normal shouldn’t be normal.” Lahan was talking nonsense.

“Lahan’s brother has been running away from locusts and bandits all this time.”

Now that he thought about it, Maomao had done similar things in the bandit village and returned to the capital alive. He was not like the young men from a good family; his experience in real situations gave him exceptional mental strength and courage.

"Well, ready to continue?"

Lahan’s older brother didn’t look tired. He had the stamina of someone who could work all day in the fields and still remain standing. That’s what caught his attention.

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The boy from the love letter stood up, patting his belly. But given the usual attitude of Lahan’s older brother, the wooden sword slipped from his hands. He had a “what the hell is this?” expression on his face.

"It was a fair fight!"

The boy in the love letter didn't say anything else.

"Brother!"

They all approached Lahan's eldest brother, led by Lahan. Yao's eyes were filled with tears and En'en looked a little embarrassed.

"Thanks."

Yao bowed to Lahan's elder brother, tears in his eyes.

(Come to think of it, that's a bit like "don't fight for me.") If this was a romance he saw in the inner palace, this would be the moment a romance would blossom.

Maomao thought it was a good situation. Lahan’s older brother was a better choice for Yao than Lahan. She is a girl, so it wouldn’t be strange if she changed her mind and became interested in another man.

This would be better for Lahan too. Two things would be resolved once and for all: Yao's harassment and the possibility of introducing a young girl to Lahan's older brother.

However, reality did not unfold so well.

“Brother, I need to see your wound, so take off your jacket.”

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After taking so many blows, he would definitely have bruises. Maomao took out an ointment he had prepared.

"Hey, wait! Don't make me take my clothes off!"

Lahan’s elder brother, looking at Yao and the others, became nervous. It was understandable that he would feel embarrassed to take off his jacket in front of women. Even though he was working in the garden in his underwear in front of Maomao in the western capital. What had changed so much?

“More than that, I’m glad I won. I didn’t think I would die since I wasn’t fighting a thief, but it would be bad if I lost.”

“There’s nothing shameful about it. In any case, I’m very grateful that you won.” En’en bowed deeply. She was tough on men in general, but she liked Lahan’s older brother very much.

(For saving the young girl in trouble)

If En'en valued him, the chances of Lahan and Yao's older brother getting along would increase... or so he hoped.

“I can’t believe you did so much for Miss Yao. Thank you very much, Master Junjie.”

"J-junjie..."

Lahan's older brother repeated the name En'en had used. His face turned beet red in an instant.

(Huh?)

Maomao was stunned, wondering what was happening.

“Is there something wrong, Master Junjie?”

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"Uh, no, sorry. Could you repeat that?"

"Sure, thanks again. Thank you very much."

"No, it's not that. It's JUNJIE!"

Lahan’s elder brother shouted, his face even redder. Both Maomao and Lahan were speechless.

“The young man from the mansion had the same name, right? Normally you don’t reveal your name out of consideration for him, don’t you? I found it confusing, but it seemed inappropriate not to name , thank him using your name unless you don’t like being called by him... Would you prefer me to call you Lahan's older brother?"

"No! It's okay like this! I'm not just Lahan's older brother, I'm Junjie!" Lahan's older brother looked at En'en. Normally, in this situation, he should be looking at Yao, but...

The flag that was supposed to be hoisted by one person was hoisted by another.

"So, you have the same name?"

Yao looked surprised when she first heard Lahan’s older brother’s name. The tears in her eyes had already dried up, and the flag that fluttered between her and Lahan’s older brother had crumbled.

Meanwhile, a loud gong resounded in Lahan's elder brother's heart.

Maomao was surprised and looked at Lahan.

"Is this getting any more complicated?"

Maomao asked Lahan, seeking confirmation.

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"You have a special instinct for other people's love affairs, don't you?"

Maomao did not have the ability to read minds, but he understood that Lahan was feeling the same way she was at that moment.

(En'en, of all people!)

That was the question.

Chapter 6: Horses and Rabbits

The world was full of deception.

Maomao, glancing sideways at Lahan's older brother, who seemed strangely nervous, wondered what to do.

He wanted to help his brother's romance, but if his goal was En'en, who put everything for Yao first, he saw nothing but trouble ahead.

(Well, I'll leave that aside for now)

Maomao has a habit of temporarily ignoring problems that cannot be solved immediately. Instead, the next problem was just around the corner.

"Miss Maomao."

The Ma brothers approached.

"Long time no see."

"Likewise."

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"Has it been that long?"

It seemed that Maamei didn’t like Basen’s attitude, so she backhanded him, smiling. Basen, with his well-trained body, didn’t even stagger, but if it had been Lahan, he would have been sent flying backwards with a bloody nose.

Behind the brothers, the man who acted as the judge at the scene watched Maamei's actions with uneasiness.

"I appreciate you taking on the role of jury."

Maomao bowed her head respectfully. Although it wasn’t something she should say, Lahan’s elder brother couldn’t take his eyes off En’en, and Lahan was once again deep in conversation with the matriarch of the Shin clan.

“It’s nothing, it’s a common occurrence in these meetings. Many young people pride themselves on their strength, so the Ma clan always ends up acting as the jury.”

Maamei's smile seemed a little suspicious to Maomao.

“By the way, Miss Maomao, I saw you together with the U clan just now.

(What piercing eyes he has, as always)

The fact that he didn't mention that the Shin clan had also appeared indicated that Maamei had business with the U clan.

“I acted as a sort of mediator. However, please note that I have no real influence over the U clan.” Although he couldn’t give details, he wasn’t lying. Maamei should understand that probing further would be impolite.

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"I see. I won't ask about the details. But are you sure you don't owe anything for this?" Maamei's raptor eyes flashed.

“Can you imagine more or less what would happen if I told you that that eccentric also occupied the place of intermediary?”

Maomao dropped a hint, insinuating that the eccentric strategist had ruined everything. For some reason, the strategist kept patting Lahan's older brother, as if he was investigating him.

“Ah… I see. Although, the truth is that there didn’t seem to be that tense atmosphere.” Maamei nodded, though she continued to examine the situation with questioning eyes.

"To be honest, I wouldn't say there was a winner or a loser."

"Still, it's better than being completely cut off, right?" Maamei smiled and took Maomao's hand.

"Could you come with me for a moment?"

(What do you want me to do this time?)

Maomao wanted to clarify that it was not a simple invitation, but rather a kind of “kidnapping”.

"Sister, are you going somewhere?"

Finally, Lahan noticed the presence of the Ma brothers. His expression seemed a little brighter, probably because he had obtained a favor from the matriarch of the Shin clan.

"Master Lahan, can I take your sister for a moment?"

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Maomao wasn't sure if Lahan and Maamei knew each other, nor did he remember, but as smart as Maamei was, she had probably already memorized the names and faces of all the children of the most illustrious families.

“...It’s okay if it’s someone from the Ma clan.”

Lahan seemed to have calculated everything instantly in his head. It wouldn't hurt to gain favor with Basen and his sister, who had connections to Jinshi.

(The U clan and the Ma brothers...)

This probably had something to do with Lishu. If it were Lishu, Maomao would have considered cooperating. However, it bothered him a little that he seemed to be doing Lahan a favor. He pointed at the eccentric strategist and sent him a silent order: “Take care of this guy.”

"Okay, Miss Maomao, this way."

Maomao followed Maamei, who smiled sweetly at her.

The place where Maamei took Maomao was far from the central courtyard, in another garden. From the presence of peonies and daffodils without flowers, it was clear that it was a winter garden.

On the way, Maomao was introduced to a middle-aged man who was accompanying them.

"Sorry I didn't introduce you earlier. This is my husband."

“That’s right, I’m Maamei’s husband.”

"He is my brother-in-law."

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The man who acted as judge was Maamei's husband, as expected.

Even though it would only take one person to say it, the three of them took the time to explain. He didn't say his name, but Maomao didn't mind too much since she wasn't sure if she would be able to remember it later. It was probably some "Ba-something."

Maamei's husband was sturdy, but he exuded a somewhat awkward atmosphere. Although he appeared quiet, he gave off the impression of being considerate, which reminded him of Gaoshun. Perhaps everyone in the Ma family was used to being dominated by their wives.

"I'm sorry if my wife caused any inconvenience."

"No, it's not a bother"

The way Maamei's husband treated his younger subordinates with such courtesy reminded him even more of Gaoshun. Thinking of him, Maomao wondered if he was really as estranged from his own daughter as he claimed.

"By the way, haven't you wondered why we have affairs with the U clan?" Maamei asked, as if it had just occurred to her.

"You want to introduce Master Basen, who is completely in love with Miss Lishu, right?" Maomao said this bluntly, as he found evasive answers tedious.

"¡W-w-wah!"

"Basen was visibly nervous, his face was as red as a cooked shrimp.

"That's right. This guy has always been very shy and I was worried he would never get married. We even made poor Baryou, who is in poor health, try hard to give us children! And

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Now, it turns out that the person he fell in love with is a former high-ranking consort," Maamei said with a smile.

"It's not like I'm... in love or anything, sister," Basen protested.

"Don't you love her?"

“Of course it’s not that!” Basen shouted. His voice was so loud that even in a private room it would have been difficult to keep the conversation quiet. Perhaps it would be better to talk in this off-season garden, where there was no one around.

“You already know Miss Lishu, right, Maomao?”

"Yes. I understand that she hasn't had much luck in life, especially when it comes to her family. I heard that she's now become a nun. From what I've seen, her father and half-sister aren't good." people. Her grandfather doesn't look like that, but his lack of trust in his son-in-law brought misfortune to his granddaughter."

"That's right. Lishu is only eighteen years old. Even if we assume that life lasts fifty years, spending the rest of her days in a temple is too cruel. A loving grandfather wouldn't want that for her, right?" Maamei asked Maomao the question.

"The head of the U clan seems to be a person of great compassion. If there are no political intentions involved, appealing to his emotions can be effective," Maomao commented, recalling the interaction he witnessed between the U and Shin clans. "Exactly" It seems like it was a desirable answer for Maamei. Basen also had bright eyes, something unusual for him. Maamei's husband remained silent. It was not clear to Maomao why he was accompanying them.

“However, the fact that Lishu was sent to the nunnery twice after two marriages into the imperial family is

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extraordinary. Without the emperor's approval, I see no clear future for her.”

“Don’t worry about it. The emperor loves her as if she were his own daughter. As long as there is a proper reason, I don’t think it will be difficult to persuade him. Lishu has more room to maneuver than the emperor’s biological daughters,” Maamei explained.

(More than your biological daughters, huh?)

Maomao felt how cruel reality was. The princesses, with imperial blood running through their veins, were destined to be used as political pawns, even if they were loved. He remembered how the emperor pampered Princess Lishu, knowing that one day she would also be used in political games.

“We wanted to talk to the U clan, but the truth is that we don't have close contacts in our generation, which has been a problem.”

“No, I don’t have any real acquaintances either. Plus, shouldn’t you have already made an appointment?” Maomao was stunned. It didn’t seem like she was as meticulous as she was.

“The former head of the U clan, or rather the current one, seems to have resumed his role. The head is said to enjoy spending time in the conservatory that his only daughter enjoyed in life.”

"Should I really interrupt your moment of silence?"
Maomao thought that if he bothered the other person, there would be no way to negotiate.

“If it’s not a problem, then it’s okay. Miss Maomao, you’ve met Lishu before, right?” Maamei took Maomao’s hand and quickly walked forward.

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They approached a gazebo surrounded by peonies and could see some shadows.

"There they are."

There was an old man, a middle-aged woman who looked like his assistant, a young man, and a small child. The boy looked to be about ten years old, and the young man was taking care of him.

The old man was the same U clan chief he had seen before. (He has no guards, he is quite reckless)

Maamei tidied up her hair and clothes, gently touched up her lipstick, and approached the gazebo very naturally. Her eyes, as piercing as those of a bird of prey, were narrowed in a smile. Although she did this so as not to scare the child, her performance was truly impressive.

“I’m sorry for the interruption.” It wasn’t Maamei who came forward, but her husband.

(So you brought him to this)

Although Maamei seemed to be an important figure within the Ma clan, speaking directly to the head of another clan might be inappropriate. So she brought her husband as an intermediary, a formality to facilitate the meeting.

(Maybe Basen could do that too)

He didn't think Basen could make a proper introduction to the U clan.
He still knew how tense he was.

“Ah, those from the Ma clan!”

“I introduce myself, my name is Bakin,” Maamei’s husband replied.

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(I'll probably forget...) Maomao thought as he stood behind Maamei.

"This is my wife, Maamei, and my brother-in-law, Basen. And—"

“I am Maomao. My apologies for what happened before.”
Maomao bowed neutrally.

The head of the U clan narrowed his eyes as he looked at Maomao.

"Yes, before there were... certain things that happened, things that made me think... yes, think a lot..." said the chief, visibly avoiding going into details, probably due to the matter of the Shin clan's family treasure. Maomao hoped that he would also forget the blow he had dealt to the eccentric strategist.

“Then what business do you, who are from the Ma clan and bring Lakan’s daughter, have?”

Not only the U clan head, but also the others present watched curiously. It was then that Maamei took a step forward.

“This is Maomao, who worked in the inner palace for two years.”

“In the inner palace?”

(Approximately two years...)

Maomao came and went during this period, so it actually took less time.
But there was no need to clarify.

“During this time, he had the opportunity to strengthen ties with Miss Lishu.”

(Not that we were that close) Maomao thought, but couldn't say it at that moment.

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“I’m sure that the head of the U clan has exchanged correspondence with Miss Lishu, but in those letters she probably hid her true feelings so as not to worry anyone. That’s why Maomao, who knew her personally, always wanted to tell her. “How is she really?” Maamei spoke with a delicate expression and glazed eyes. If you didn’t know her true nature, you could easily be deceived.

“Hmm… although, if that’s the case, I would have preferred if they told me earlier,” the U clan head commented, which was quite reasonable, and Maomao agreed. It didn't seem necessary to involve the Ma clan in this matter.

“My father’s name is Gaoshun. He was His Imperial Majesty’s adopted brother.”

“Gaoshun… so it’s that kid. I heard that he changed his name when he became a eunuch and then entered the palace.”

It seems that the head of the U clan knows Gaoshun. Furthermore, from their tone, they seem to have been friends for some time.

“Yes, my father was the Moon Prince’s guard and had always cared about Miss Lishu who was in the inner palace. Although Miss Lishu is part of the U clan, she was also like a daughter to the emperor and I, Gaoshun, who were childhood friends. If it weren’t for the sacred duty of protecting the imperial family, he would have certainly expressed his displeasure at their unfortunate situation.

(It's really impressive)

Maomao couldn't help but feel admiration for Maamei's performance. I didn't know if it was true, but I also couldn't say it was completely false. When Gaoshun told him about the harassment Lishu was suffering in the inner palace, he showed a very complicated expression. It was a problem for

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he as the caretaker of the inner palace, but it wouldn't be strange if there was also some concern for the daughter of a childhood friend.

“Furthermore, I heard at the time that there was an attempted arranged marriage between my father and Lishu’s mother. To think that Lishu could have been my younger sister… it breaks my heart.”

Suddenly, he dropped a bomb.

“Ah, aa-aah”

Basen’s mouth was slightly agape, clearly he didn’t know anything about this. To calm down her visibly upset brother, Maamei punched him in the stomach, making sure the U Clan Chief didn’t see it. Thanks to Basen’s strong torso, he was able to resist, but if it were Lahan, he probably wouldn’t have been able to resist.

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“The involvement with the Ma family was just a matter that came up casually. It’s not something you need to worry about.”

"Yes, that's how it is."

The head of the U clan didn't seem to pay much attention to him and let the matter drop. For wealthy families, commitments that go and

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come are quite common. "However, could you tell me about my granddaughter?"

"Of course."

Maamei bowed humbly, but it was Maomao who spoke.

“The first time I met Lishu was at a garden party.”

Maomao began to recount his experiences in the inner palace, while servants served them tea around a stone table. He explained how he was in the service of Empress Gyokuyou, thanks to that relationship, he met Lishu, who was also a high-ranking consort at the time.

“At the party, she was wearing an outfit that didn’t suit the occasion.”

The U clan hehe frowned. The young man who was with him looked away and began to play with the child.

“During the meal, they changed the blue fish, which Lishu couldn’t eat. It was an act of harassment and he developed hives on his arms, which I treated myself.

“Maomao has medical knowledge and currently works at the doctor's office.”
Maamei added this explanation.

The head of the U clan frowned even more, while his caretaker, a middle-aged woman, remained attentive to his expressions.
The young man gave the boy fruit to distract him.

“At one of the teas, they gave him a drink with honey without telling him it contained that ingredient.”

The head of the U clan sighed heavily. Lishu, who had always been in fragile health, had certainly been raised with great care during

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your childhood.

(Listening to all this must be really hard)

However, what caught Maomao’s attention the most was not the U clan chief, but the person beside him. Beside him, Basen was grinding his teeth so hard that even Maomao could hear it, and his eyes were red. I could even hear his heavy breathing.

(Everything will be fine?)

Maomao was worried, but realized that Maamei had him under control, tightly gripping his brother's obi bow to stop him from rushing forward. Maamei's husband was also watching Basen, ready to intervene if anything happened.

Bakin was probably hired for this reason.

"After the head maid was replaced, the new head maid served very well."

“However, the former boss and the other maids continued their bad behavior. They took things from Lishu and even tried to steal the mirror that was a keepsake from her mother.”

“The mirror? That mirror?” asked the head of the U clan.

“Yes, the mirror in which Miss Lishu’s mother’s image was reflected.”

It was the story of when Lishu said she saw a ghost in the palace bath. The ghost turned out to be the reflection of her mother's face in the mirror and a swaying curtain, but Lishu unknowingly got scared and ended up in the public baths.

There is no need to tell how I completely undressed her and shaved her at that moment.

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He also recounted his first trip to the western capital. However, at that time, he never imagined that he would return, much less that he would stay for a whole year.

“At one of the banquets, Miss Lishu was attacked by a lion.”

During a banquet that looked more like a wife seeking Jinshi, the cage of a beast on display broke.

"A lion... that idiot just mentioned to me that there was an incident."

The head of the U clan clenched his fist tightly. The veins on his temples bulged as his assistant wiped away the sweat with a towel, visibly worried. The young man, seeing the chief’s anger, took the boy away to another place to prevent him from seeing him.

“Back then, the one who helped was Master Basen here.”

Maomao quickly introduced the man who killed the lion, an unusual man. Basen, who was about to explode, was suddenly called out and reacted with a start.

"Did you save my granddaughter?"

“N-no, I just did what I had to do,” Basen replied.
Maomao looked coldly at Basen's typical modesty. (The old man looks ready to explode. Maybe we should stop with the sad stories here. I still have a few, but...)

Maomao was thinking about it, but then...

“It’s a pity that Lishu’s misfortune was caused by his own father. I also heard that the lion attack was caused because his stepsister applied a perfume that attracted beasts to him.”

(What is he saying now?)

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Basen let slip exactly what Mohammed avoided mentioning.

"...Ligue para Jun."

The U clan chief’s voice was low and growling. His beard was trembling and his eyes were slightly red. The woman in charge of his care bowed slightly and went to look for the young man who was taking care of the child.

"What's wrong?" The young man, who was taking care of the child, bowed politely.

"I told you to speak openly about your sister's actions. Why did you hide it?"

(Sister?)

Maomao remembered that besides her half-sister, Lishu had a half-brother. This young man named “Jun” seemed to be Lishu’s half-brother.

“My sister regrets having harmed Miss Lishu and will no longer appear in public. I ask that you bear this with patience.”
Although his tone was polite, Jun used words that were not entirely appropriate in this situation.

“That she won’t appear in public?! Lishu became a nun. Who is responsible for this?”

“My father, Uryuu, me, UJun, and my sister.” The young man named Jun spoke in an impassive tone.

"Who allowed you to use the character 'U'?"

“My apologies.” Jun bowed deeply.

“You will be punished for destroying Lishu’s life.”

"I understand."

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“Go away.” Maomao was nervous. He thought that the clan head might hit the young man, but it seemed that he would not act impulsively at this moment.

The generosity he had shown to the Shin clan was not present here. The head of the U clan was a man of character, but he seemed too harsh towards those who had mistreated his granddaughter for years. The son-in-law and his sons lost all trust.

(Well, he's probably more generous than he looks.) Although he didn't know how big the U clan was, it at least seemed to be much larger than the La clan. The clan's downfall would mean that dozens or even hundreds of people would be left destitute.

The head of the U clan had regained the position of clan head after having taken it from his son-in-law. However, returning the ship to its course after nearly sinking must have been a great burden for the elderly leader.

Ujun should consider himself lucky that he wasn't expelled from the clan. Her sister also claimed to have regrets, but she certainly wasn't living a life of misery.

“I’m sorry to show you this unpleasant situation.” The boss’s assistant wiped his sweat. A boy approached the boss and offered him a drink. UJun, on the other hand, was smiling silly, as if he were a court jester. Maomao felt that UJun was acting like a clown in the middle of the whole situation.

“Normally, the right thing to do would be to expel him from the clan, but in Lishu’s letters she wrote that she did not want that man to be harmed.”

By “that man” he probably meant Lishu’s father.

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The fact that Ujun was brought to the meeting can be seen, in a sense, as an example to others, a public warning.

(It's very cruel)

“However, what Lishu’s father did to Lishu was much more cruel.”

Although he wasn’t directly responsible, the fact that Ujun only received this kind of humiliation was a stroke of luck. More than anything, he seemed accustomed to humiliation. Sometimes, a lack of pride can make life easier.

Ujun is responsible for his fate and worthy of sympathy. But it is not something Maomao should get involved in. No matter how righteous one is, there are things that simply cannot be forgiven.
This was not the time for Muhammad to lecture him about not taking it out on others.

"Can I continue with the story?"

Maomao asked the head of the U clan.

"I would appreciate that."

"Although, really, I don't have much more to say."

Telling more about Lishu's misfortunes would not ease the boss's feelings.

“The only thing I can say is that Lishu’s removal from the position of consort and her departure from the palace was not her fault. And I believe that His Imperial Majesty was also worried about her and kept her away from the palace on purpose. She must still have a future ahead of her.”

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The U clan head rubbed his forehead. He even seemed to be trembling slightly.

“Lishu wrote that she was fulfilling her role as a high-ranking consort well…”

"He probably tried not to worry his grandfather."

"If I had understood what was happening."

The U clan chief seemed angry at himself for leaving Lishu in that situation for so long.

There was no longer any way to punish the maids who mistreated her.
Surely they had already been punished when Lishu left the palace.
These maids, leaving the palace under such circumstances, must be suffering shame.

Your reputation has been affected and your marital arrangements will also have suffered.

(Will this be okay?)

Maomao spoke about Lishu as requested, sitting at the same table as the U clan head. Furthermore, she mentioned how Basen saved Lishu and made it clear that it was not her fault.

Now that Maamei’s turn had passed, Maomao felt that he had done his part.
However, Maamei’s look seemed to say to him, “Can’t you do a little more?”

(That's awesome!)

Even so, Muhammad was known for accepting difficult challenges.
“In Lishu’s letters, he said that he was fulfilling his duty as a high-ranking consort, right?”

"That's how it is."

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“...Lishu was trying really hard.”

Maomao purposely spoke in a low voice.

"What do you mean I was trying too hard?"

The U clan elder frowned as his mustache trembled.

“A consort’s work in the palace, this is something that cannot be avoided…”

Maomao glanced at Basen. At first, Basen didn’t understand what he meant, but after blinking several times, he finally understood. His face immediately turned red, not from anger, but from embarrassment mixed with frustration.

(A consort's duty is to have children with the emperor)

Empress Gyokuyou and Consort Lihua obeyed. Even Shisui, or rather, Loulan, apparently obeyed. But the only high-ranking consort who didn’t need to meet the emperor was Lishu.

"To the emperor, Lishu was like a daughter. She never went to his bed, nor did she become his concubine."

Maomao slowly shook his head. Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at Maamei, who looked quite satisfied, the corners of her mouth twitching slightly. Basen, on the other hand, had an expression of relief mixed with surprise.

“If it weren’t like this, the emperor wouldn’t have taken Lishu out of the palace.”

“In principle, if a consort shared the emperor’s bed even once, she was destined to spend the rest of her life in the palace. Although there were exceptions like A-Duo, she continued to live under the emperor’s protection. in a

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imperial residence. It is undeniable that they are under the protection of the emperor."

"So it was true."

The head of the U clan nodded, satisfied.

"That's how it is."

Maomao let out a sigh. “I heard that many of the consorts who left the palace untouched by the emperor have remarried.”

It may seem like they are just getting in again, but if the suitor is the emperor, that changes. Even if it is the daughter of an official or a merchant, the palace provenance adds value. Many people are attracted to the palace's secret garden.
After all, being chosen as a consort is already a guarantee of beauty and good lineage.

“If Lishu hadn’t become a nun, she would have received a lot of proposals.”

“Is it selfish to want to see a great-grandchild at my advanced age?”

(I achieved!)

Maomao looked at Maamei, indicating that she had nothing more to say. Maamei, her eyes shining like a hawk, seemed satisfied.

“Can I ask a question?” Maamei raised her hand.

"What do you want to know?"

“Is Miss Lishu’s retirement as a nun final?”

“Lishu was advised to take some time to recover.”

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"Just for a while?"

"Yes, just for a while."

“Then, if the Emperor orders, Lishu could return from retirement.”

Maamei's expression made it clear that she had just gotten what she was looking for.

“Isn’t it possible for Lishu to return to the U clan and marry? She’s the only direct descendant left, right?”

"Exactly. She is my only granddaughter, the only daughter of my only daughter."

Ujun looked away. Maomao thought that this young man was also a victim. Not being a direct descendant and being the illegitimate son of a son-in-law, he felt like an outcast. If his father had not been a son-in-law, he would probably have been able to live more freely.

“But I cannot allow Lishu to suffer the same fate as my daughter. I have already decided that this child will be the next heir. I will not allow another unhappy marriage.” The head of the U clan stroked the head of a boy who was eating sweets. It was the child Ujun was taking care of.

“Then there would be no problem if my clan presented a marriage proposal to Lishu?” Maamei finally got to the point.

Basen bit his lips so much that they were now purple.

“Does the Ma clan want to join us?”

"Yes. If Lishu wants to inherit the main clan, she needs to marry a man from the secondary branch. But if she doesn't want to do that, I would like her to meet someone from my family."

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"It's interesting."

The head of the U clan glanced at Basen briefly. He seemed to have immediately understood who the suitor was.

“In the past, I thought of establishing a bond with the Ma clan. But —”

(But...?)

"Even if you establish a bond with our clan, it wouldn't make much sense. The U clan no longer has the power it used to have. Unlike other clans, the Ma clan wouldn't gain any benefits. I don't want to accept a proposal that doesn't offer any advantages to the clan elsewhere."

“I just heard that you were talking about something with the Shin clan. Hasn’t the conflict already been resolved?”

Maamei seemed to know where the conversation was going or was trying to ask difficult questions. Maomao, in turn, tried to convey to the U clan head that she had not said anything.

“There have been several problems with the Shin clan, but that has nothing to do with you.”

"That's true. However, regarding Miss Lishu, couldn't you consider a marriage regardless of bloodline?"

“Are you saying they want Lishu as he is?” The head of the U clan regards Maamei and Basen with an appraising gaze, as if gauging the value of their proposal. She probably regrets assigning her daughter to an unsuitable suitor in the past.

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“If I’m going to marry Lishu, I have a few candidates in mind, but—”

“Could you include someone from the Ma clan in these candidates?”

Maamei presses on relentlessly. While his approach may seem reckless, it is a proposal that should not be seen as negative, but rather as something that appeals to the U clan chief. However, the chief does not agree.

“I can’t send Lishu to any clan right now. I don’t know where the enemy is. My clan has been weakened due to my miscalculations. Furthermore, things are happening that I can’t explain with just this. It’s as if we’re suffering some kind of punishment for abandoning Lishu.”

“What kind of punishment?”

“Hehehe, do you want me to tell you more shameful things about my clan? Okay, fine. Gaoshun’s daughter has good instincts, so you’ll know. They seem to hate me in the new military faction.” The head of the U clan only says this.

(New military faction?)

It was a topic I heard somewhere recently.

“I want to resolve this while I’m still alive. I want to make sure this child can inherit the clan.”

The head of the U clan seems to be pushing himself beyond his strength.

“So, shall we return to the banquet?”

The caregiver moves the chair with wheels.

“Thank you for listening to our proposal.”

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Maamei doesn’t seem like she’s going to delve any deeper. She bows deeply and watches the U clan head walk away. Once the U clan completely disappears from view, a wave of exhaustion washes over her.

(¡Uf!)

Maomao lowers his shoulders, relaxing.

“As always, you are amazing, Maomao! You did a perfect job.”

Maamei praised her, but Maomao did not feel able to accept the praise sincerely.

“However, the U clan has taken a reserve position.”

“It is better to plant the seed, even if it is, than to do nothing. Whether it will grow or not is something we will see later.”

The wife looked excited, while the husband looked at her with a warm smile. The brother, on the other hand, looked more overwhelmed than Maomao and had yet to fully recover.

"I'll retire here, if that's okay."

“Oh, you look tired. “I thought you were used to these things.”

Maamei, satisfied, smiled much more than before, with a genuine smile and not the fake one she had shown before.

“When you suddenly come across information you didn’t know, the tiredness becomes even stronger.”

“Oh, you mean the engagement between the U clan and the Ma clan? When the ages of the men and women are close, there always arise

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trivial matters.”

"It's a topic I hear about often."

However, rumors about this kind of thing among acquaintances tend to be sensitive. Relations with the imperial family are already complicated.

(Lishu's mother was a childhood friend of the Emperor, as was A-Duo)

It would not be unusual for Gaoshun, the emperor's supervisor, to be involved in the circle.

(Changing the subject...)

“By the way, Chue isn’t here today, right?”

“Ms. Chue has another job. Although she was quite reluctant, she went to work because they asked her to.”

Maomao and Maamei walk slowly as they talk. The two men remain silent, following from behind. Maamei's husband is indeed a reserved man.

“Miss Chue is very good at languages, so even if she is missing an arm, if she has a spare head and mouth, there will always be something to do.”

While it's clear that Maamei appreciates Chue, the way she says it seems a bit cruel.

“Are you acting as an interpreter for foreigners?”

Maomao asked the question out of simple curiosity and it was not the best thing to do.

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“Yes, they say he is listening carefully, because they arrested several prisoners and left them in jail. Maybe they are talking about something.”

“That looks dangerous.”

It was a disturbing subject.

It is not uncommon to capture foreigners at the border. They are usually executed immediately, as they are often involved in bandit activities. Since they are prisoners, I assume they have a certain status.

“Chue has lost mobility in his right hand, but it appears he will have no problems working.”

“That’s how it is. He would probably leave his position as the Moon Prince’s assistant. From now on, my mother will take her place. Finding a replacement maid has been difficult.”

“That’s true. Lady Suiren is quite strict.”

Of course, Maamei's mother Taomei is also strict. Only someone exceptional or someone with a personality as flamboyant as Chue could handle the job.

“Normally, Lady Suiren is at an age where it wouldn’t be surprising if she retired long ago. Given her position, it’s not a good idea to be too attached to the Moon Prince.”

“Because of your position?” Maomao asked again.

“You don’t know? They say she was the legendary servant who protected the young empress dowager when she had no support.

This looks like something out of a play.

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“Yes, she was a maid and wet nurse. The young empress, being small, was unable to breastfeed properly, so she was also the wet nurse who breastfed the Emperor.”

“Servant and wet nurse.”

He knew that she was Jinshi and the Emperor’s wet nurse, but he thought that being a wet nurse didn’t necessarily mean breastfeeding, so he considered her more of a caregiver. “Since Gaoshun is the Emperor’s adopted brother, I always thought that Gaoshun’s mother was the wet nurse.”

"My grandmother was also a wet nurse, but she was assigned to the emperor when he stopped breastfeeding."

"Eh?"

(Wait a minute)

In this case, there should be another adoptive sibling. Basically, breast milk is not produced until the child is born and stops being produced when the child grows up. Suiren should have a son close to the Emperor's age.

“Could it be that Lady Suiren is Lady A-Duo’s mother?” Maomao asked, tilting his head.

“Yes, you didn’t know?” Maamei also lowered her head.

"No, no, no! They don't look alike at all!"

At first glance, Suiren looked gentle and sweet, while A-Duo was tall and headstrong.

“I heard that Lady A-Duo looks like her father,” Maamei said.

Maamei stopped. It seemed that if they continued walking they would arrive at the banquet without having finished their conversation.

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"No, no, no! Lady A-Duo and Lady Suiren are incredibly formal with each other."

Maomao had never seen the two of them together, but he had the impression that Suiren treated A-Duo more like a high-ranking person than her own daughter.

“Ms. Suiren comes from a commoner family. Ever since Lady A-Duo became the Emperor’s consort, she seems to have maintained a clear distinction in her position. Thinking about it, it’s unlikely that Ms. Suiren would be a commoner.” Suiren talks about the mother-daughter relationship with Maomao,” Maamei explained.

"Well, there was no way I could have known then."

Furthermore, he recalled that during one of his walks, the clothes Maomao wore belonged to Suiren's daughter.

(I can't imagine A-Duo wearing that kind of clothing!) The reason why Mrs. Suiren seemed to enjoy dressing Maomao so much might have been because she was replacing her daughter, who didn't wear clothes according to her taste. .

(How about Jinshi?)

It's true that Maomao never asked about Suiren's daughter, but it's also true that Jinshi never mentioned it. Maybe Jinshi thought that Suiren had already told Maomao.

Maomao felt his head spinning again. This kind of relationship within the imperial family had always been a headache.

“However, Lady Suiren, despite being of common origin, became a wet nurse,” Maomao repeated the information in his mind to try to organize his thoughts.

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“Yes. It seems that Lady Suiren returned home after her husband died during pregnancy and returned home before any succession issues arose. Apparently, her parents were not very good, and after giving birth to Lady A-Duo, they sold her and sent her to the palace,” Maamei explained.

“Right after giving birth?” Maomao asked. After giving birth, you were supposed to rest a bit, so it was quite a cruel story.

“Yes. At that time, the palace was in a ‘have children at all costs’ atmosphere. It was a time when young women with experience in childbirth were favored,” Maamei added.

It seemed that politics were completely different from today. All of this was caused by the lack of babies due to the previous emperor's peculiarities.

“Thanks to that, Lady Suiren was able to find Lady A-Duo, who was hiding her pregnancy, and became a servant,” Maamei continued. Even the legendary waitress had a difficult past.

“But is it normal for the mother of an emperor’s consort to be appointed as the wet nurse of the emperor’s younger brother?”

It could cause problems in the succession to the throne, since a prince's wet nurse was the mother of an emperor's consort.

"It's a very unusual case. But it's not uncommon for siblings to share the same wet nurse."

Maomao also considered this to be logical. “However, what is exceptional is that the Emperor and the Moon Prince have a large age difference, and the Emperor took Lady A-Duo, who is his adopted sister, as his consort.”

Maomao nodded in understanding.

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“My clan’s Ma often becomes a wet nurse for members of the imperial family. Over the generations, she has been an adopted sister to the imperial family. But for this very reason, we have never been given important positions or considered consorts.”

This is a mechanism to prevent members of the imperial family from accumulating too much power. Maomao recalled that he had never heard of Basen or Gaoshun having an official title.

This makes Maomao reevaluate how special A-Duo’s position is. At the same time, he knows that Jinshi’s position is even more special, but he tries hard not to let it show on his face.

“Currently, Empress Gyokuyou’s imperial prince, who is the crown prince, is accompanied by my husband and another member of the Ma clan. Furthermore, when Consort Lihua’s imperial prince leaves the palace, at least one of our people will accompany him.”

“So it seems that the Ma family has quite a bit of influence over many of them.”

Maomao commented objectively.

“That’s because we have served the Crown Prince for many years. It’s only natural that we receive special treatment. Well, we’d better get back to the banquet.”

(Is it just because of that...?)

Maomao thought about it, but decided not to delve into it. Instead, he chose to focus on whether anyone had caused any trouble at the banquet.

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Chapter 7: The Missing Thief - Part One

The first day of the nobles' meeting ended after an avalanche of events.

As soon as the evening banquet ended, Maomao was overcome by sleep. She barely remembered how En'en had forced her to go to the bathroom when she was about to fall asleep with her clothes on. In contrast, the second day was much calmer.

Most notably, the eccentric strategist began playing Go for bets, trying to leave some high-ranking officials from other families in their underwear.

Furthermore, Lahan's older brother kept asking questions about En'en.

From Maomao's perspective, the problems with the young man in Yao's love letters had been resolved and she had managed to introduce the Shin and Ma clans, which he considered a success. Although he felt that more problems had arisen than had been resolved, he decided to be happy because at least he would return home without incident.

The second day ended at noon, with no banquets or formal events. Only a few families who wanted to interact took time to chat.

There were those who felt satisfied after the success of a business deal and others who felt discouraged by a meeting that failed.

Lahan talked at length with the Shin clan and apparently came to an agreement that they would not bother Yao any longer.
At that very moment, he was selling exotic swords and armor that he had acquired through trade. The young man obsessed with love letters seemed so uncomfortable that he remained

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in silence. However, it seemed like he was talking to a group of young people his age, who seemed to be his friends.

(I hope she doesn't try some weird revenge) As for that, all that was left was to trust the matriarch.

So Maomao and the others began to prepare to return home.

“En’en is good at cooking, right? What vegetables do you think she would like me to grow?” Lahan’s elder brother asked Maomao as he loaded the luggage into the carriage. Although he denies it, his mind is completely that of a peasant. Furthermore, he is fully willing to please En’en.

"I'm in trouble if you ask me."

"And who is eating En'en's food in abundance?"

"I haven't eaten recently."

Who is this obvious brother?

“Brother, why don’t you try growing spices?” Lahan shrewdly recommends a crop that can be profitable.

"Do you want me to plant pepper? I don't know how to do it."

“But don’t you think that if you succeed you could improve your dishes a lot?” You could almost hear the

sound of calculations in Lahan's head.

“Master Lakan, what do we do with this luggage?”

"Hmm, do what you want with it."

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The eccentric strategist was having the loot from his Go games moved by Erfan (Number Two). Although he did not keep anyone's underwear, he did accumulate several good-quality items of clothing, such as coats and belts. Maomao felt like offering condolences to those who had lost in these games. He knew that Lahan would sell these items later.

“What will you do next, Maomao?”

Yao asked him, as En'en loaded Yao's huge luggage into the carriage. Did I really need so much for one night?

"I think I'll head back to the dorms. I have work tomorrow."

"Me too."

“We must have a lot of work to do.”

Maomao and Yao sighed in unison. Thinking about the next day's work put them in a bad mood.

“Hey, Lahan!” Maomao called to Lahan, who kept recommending highly profitable crops to his older brother.

"What is happening?"

“Drop me off at the entrance to the dormitories” Maomao did not want to be taken to the eccentric strategist’s house.

"Understood."

Just as Maomao was about to board the float, someone appeared, raising a cloud of dust.

"What is happening?"

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The sound of a horse echoed and a snorting horse quickly approached Maomao. “Hey, girl!”

"Mr. Lihaku, what's wrong? What are you doing here?"

Lihaku was riding a horse. Although he normally had a friendly expression, he now looked somewhat stern.

"I need you to come to House Verdigris immediately!"

"What is happening?" From the hustle and bustle of Lihaku, a worrying atmosphere can be perceived.

"Bandits entered the Verdigris House. Pairin was injured."

"What?!" If her elder sister, who had always helped her, was injured, Maomao would not be able to remain calm.

Maomao tried to climb up behind Lihaku.

"Hey, this horse is tired! Let's change it." Lahan's elder brother takes the horses out of the carriage and brings them over. He is very considerate in these matters.

“Thank you, Lahan’s elder brother!”

Lihaku also quickly changes the horse's saddle. It seems he is used to doing this quickly.

“Hope, Maomao!”

“I'll go back first!”

Yao calls her, but Maomao is already riding.

"Vamos!"

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Lihaku kicked the horse's belly. Maomao held Lihaku's waist tightly to keep him from falling. The journey there took about an hour, but the journey back took less than half an hour.

The streets of the red-light district she was familiar with had a different atmosphere than usual. Although the nightlife had not yet begun, there was an unusual hustle and bustle.

"Hey, here's the girl!"

Maomao and Lihaku left the horse and entered the Verdigris House.
The courtesans who would normally still be dozing are gathered in the lobby without makeup.

“Wow, what an exaggeration!” A hoarse voice was heard, worn out by life.

"Old!"

It was the old woman, smoking a pipe as always.

“Lihaku, as much as you care about Pairin, don’t make so much noise.”

“Hehe, that’s right, that’s right. I just got scared by the thief and fell to the ground.” The seductive and cheerful voice is Pairin, who is sitting on a chair and receiving water from a maid.

"Thief? Wasn't he a bandit?"

"And that's why I didn't prescribe any medication."

From the pharmacy, Sazen poked his head out before returning to his seat. It was the man Maomao had turned into an apothecary when he began working at court, and he seemed to be doing his job.

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“Lihaku, you’re a worrier!” Pairin slaps Lihaku’s chest.

“Well, if something happened to Pairin, I wouldn’t be able to keep calm.”

“But there was also no need to bring Maomao here.”

“I really wanted to bring Luomen, but I was told that she is in the palace. The doctors here are not trustworthy, so I decided to bring you, girl.

It seems that Lihaku loses his cool when he's with Pairin, although it was obvious that he was overreacting.

“Hehe, you said you would find Maomao, but it took you so long,” Pairin said.

Lihaku was melting with affection, while Maomao, who had been hurriedly brought over, watched with a cold gaze as the two flirted.

“I’m sorry I can’t help.” Sazen stuck half of his face out of the pharmacy, his tone clearly offended, before disappearing again.

"Can I go now?" Maomao asked with a tired look at the old woman.

"Wait a moment. Since you've come, look for any clues about the escaped thief before you leave."

"They didn't catch him?"

"No, that escaped us."

"Call the authorities."

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“Hehe, we don’t want the rumor to spread that a brothel needs the guards’ help, do we?”

Maomao nods, understanding what I mean.

"Could you take a look at my room now?" Joka's voice sounded sleepy, accompanied by a yawn. Normally he was always immaculate, but today he was wearing his nightclothes.

“Whose room?”

“The thief didn’t enter Pairin’s room, but mine. You’re an expert at finding criminals, right?”

“Not that I’m an expert, but I’ll see.”

Maomao went up to the third floor, where Joka's room was. As the floor rose, the rooms of the most important courtesans became larger and more luxurious. Joka's room consisted of three interconnected rooms.

"Vaya..."

"Do you see how confusing this is?"

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The room was a mess. All the books had been knocked off the shelf and were lying on the floor. The desk drawers had also been turned over.

The two adjoining rooms, connected to each other, were also in disarray.

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"The clothes are a mess."

Silk dresses were trampled and hairpins were scattered everywhere.

"..."

Maomao squinted his eyes and looked at the fallen clothes. Although they were wrinkled and worn, at least they weren't too dirty. The hairpins looked like they had been crushed, as they were broken and their fragments scattered across the floor. Something about those hairpins caught his attention, so he picked one up and put it in his pocket. "Well, the thief took advantage of me while I was taking a bath, how brave!
Now I don't even have clothes to change into. I won't be able to see anyone tonight."

"Did you wash your hair in the morning?"

"That's how it is."

That was the reason why Joka was still wearing his sweater. At Casa Verdigris, hair washing day was scheduled and the bath required more water and time than normal. The women took turns, but usually those with the highest position or the most sales were the first to take the bath.

"So he took advantage of you while you were in the bathroom, was it in the morning? What time?"

"I remember Pairin had a client who didn't want to leave, so I did my first shift in the bathroom. I think it was around eight.
Just as I was washing my hair properly, I heard a commotion and when I came back, my room was a mess. It's the worst!"

"It's dirty... Also, doesn't it smell strange?"

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Maomao rubbed his nose as he approached the window. The strong scent of roses was so intense that it was almost unpleasant, so he breathed in the fresh air from outside.

"The stupid thief broke a perfume bottle that a customer gave me. It was a unique piece. I don't feel like cleaning it anymore."
Joka was clearly very upset.

Maomao took the opportunity to look out the window. Although they were on the third floor, the decorations and handrail did not make it impossible to climb up. Below was the courtyard, and in the morning there were not many people.

Even so, Maomao thought that the guards of House Verdigris were not useless. How did the thief escape so easily?

"Did they steal something from you?"

"A puzzle box. I still can't find it."

"Huh?! Aquele?"

"That one, that one."

Joka seemed more grumpy than usual. The puzzle box contained his tool of the trade: a jade tablet.
Even though it was something very important to her, she seemed surprisingly calm.

"Aren't there any other rooms that have been ransacked?"

"Only mine."

Maomao thinks, touching his chin.

The main sources of income for the Verdigris House were the Three Princesses. Meimei had recently been bought off, so there were only two left. If the thief was looking for valuables, he would have gone to their room, or perhaps the old woman's room.

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“Was Pairin in his room the whole time?”

"Of course, you know, that client you brought extended his visit until noon. He's been coming in quite often lately."

"I see."

Lihaku has been in the western capital for a year. It seems he has been spending the money he accumulated during that time visiting Pairin.

(Shouldn't you save up to buy your freedom?)

Buying a courtesan’s freedom is tricky. It takes money, but you also need to be a regular customer to gain access. That balance is hard to strike.

“Pairin’s room is next to mine, isn’t it? She heard a strange noise, went to investigate, and found the thief. The thief immediately escaped through the window.”

“And that’s why he got scared and fell to the ground.” However, Maomao felt that something wasn’t right.

“Pairin noticed the noise, right? Didn’t Lihaku notice?”

“He was probably sleeping, right? It seems he woke up when Pairin screamed as she fell on her back. He has a crush on her, he was clearly very upset.”

(Sleepy, huh?)

Maomao strokes his chin. Lihaku is not that ignorant. On the contrary, he is a calm and cunning man, despite his appearance.

"I'll take a look at Pairin's room."

"Forward." “By the way, don’t start cleaning yet,” Maomao warns Joka and heads to the next room.

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It wasn't proper to enter without permission, so he shouted at Pairin from below.

“Pairin, can I check your room for a moment?”

"Okay. But I haven't cleaned since last night.

“That’s even better.”

With her permission, Maomao entered Pairin’s room. As she said, everything was as she had left it.

Empty drink cups, breakfast bowls, discarded clothes, and an unmade bed. In addition to the aroma of incense, there was a clear smell of beast, but this is common in the brothel, so he didn't pay much attention to it.

Maomao picked up a cup of wine and sniffed it.

"Hum?"

Maomao picked up a bowl of porridge. There were two of them for breakfast. The surface was already dry and crispy. He picked up the two bowls and sniffed them alternately.

(That’s it!) Holding the bowl, Maomao left the room and went down to the first floor.

“What’s up, girl?”

Lihaku was drinking tea in the hallway. The other courtesans had already retired to their rooms. It was time to prepare for the nightly visits.

"Don't you want to go home, Lihaku?"

“Hmm, since I’m here, I’ll stay. I’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

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“You seem to have accumulated quite a bit.” Maomao pokes Lihaku a little.

"Don't say that!" Lihaku looks pleased.

“Hehehe, let’s enjoy tonight too,” Pairin said.

"Ha ha ha!"

Pairin snuggles up next to Lihaku. This night too, Lihaku would surely be exhausted from many things.

"By the way, did you have breakfast here this morning?"

"Sim."

"In this bowl?"

"Yes, why do you ask?"

Maomao put down the bowl and looked at Lihaku.

“Was the breakfast porridge tasty?”

“Yes, it was delicious and had lots of ingredients. Casa Verdigris is really impressive.”

“He looked so pleased eating that I gave him my share.”

“Ah, I see.” Maomao crossed his arms and nodded, satisfied.

"What do you mean by that?"

“Lihaku. After breakfast, did you feel very sleepy?

“Well, if you ask it like that…”

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“It’s natural to feel sleepy after a full night of activities,” Pairin said, patting Lihaku’s chest. But that wasn’t what Maomao wanted to hear right now.

"But Mr. Lihaku, despite having reversed day and night schedules in the western capital, you can always wake up quickly in emergency situations, right?"

Lihaku had been Maomao's bodyguard for a year, so he knew perfectly well that no matter how asleep he was, he could always wake up immediately.

“It doesn’t seem logical that Pairin heard a noise in the next room and that you were sleeping soundly.”

"You mean someone put something in it?" Joka came down from the third floor.

“Yes. The breakfast bowl of porridge was the kind given to troublesome customers.” Maomao showed the empty bowl. A problem client is, literally, someone unpleasant: someone who attacks the courtesans, demands services above what is agreed upon, or some are so vigorous that the courtesans cannot stand it.

In these cases, what should be done?

At Casa Verdigris, in addition to having male staff, they also employ bodyguards. If a client becomes violent, he is simply thrown out. But if they do not reach that point and become regular clients, the courtesans become worn out.

Therefore, sleeping pills are sometimes mixed with alcohol or snacks to induce sleep.

This kind of drug was in Lihaku's bowl. Even if the bowl was empty, Maomao's keen sense of smell could not be deceived.

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“I… am a troublesome customer?” Lihaku was shocked.

"No, that's not it. With other courtesans it might be, but if it's Miss Pairin, only someone with Lihaku's stamina could deal with her."

“Exactly,” Pairin added comfortingly. The situation was special because Pairin was an unusual courtesan.

"Oh really?"

"Yes, yes, be sure to visit me again."

“Of course!” Lihaku had recovered, but the problem was still that there were sleeping pills in the porridge. Lihaku’s strange behavior that day might be due to the effect of the medicine.

The sleeping pills used at Casa Verdigris are much more effective when combined with alcohol. When used on problematic clients, the dosage is adjusted so as not to cause adverse effects, but if administered unexpectedly, this is not guaranteed.

(Couldn't they have mixed more?) Maomao sniffed the empty bowl again.

“When the thief came in, Joka was in the bathroom and they made porridge with sleeping pills for Miss Pairin.”

It was too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence. At this moment, there were only private rooms on the third floor for Pairin and Joka.

“Pairin, you said the thief escaped through the window, right?”

"Yes, that's how it is."

"And what was he dressed as?"

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"He was wearing brown clothes. It was a flash, so I couldn't see what kind of coat he was wearing, but underneath he had a hakama." It was a common and comfortable type of clothing. I'm sure many people wear it on the street.

“Also, he had an agile body, it seems that his muscles were well defined and not unnecessary” It was the testimony of a typical sighting of Pairin, who loves muscles.

“And who brought the porridge for breakfast?”

“It was one of the little apprentices, Zulin. Since Lihaku was here, Chou-u came too.”

“Chou-you too? “He never shows up when I’m there.”

Maomao clicked his tongue. Chou-u was a troublesome boy whom Maomao had been taking care of for some time. Perhaps he was in a rebellious stage, but lately he didn’t want to face Maomao.

“Speaking of the King of Rome…” Maomao muttered as he saw Chou-u and Zulin approaching through the entrance.

"¡Chou-u!"

"What?!" Seeing Maomao, Chou-u becomes on guard.

The little brat, whom I hadn’t seen in a while, had grown quite a bit. He was already taller than Maomao, and his figure seemed a bit more angular. He had had some time to grow facial hair, but he was in the transition from childhood to adolescence.

Zulin was a girl who arrived at House Verdigris with her sister, thanks to Maomao's recommendation. She was still Chou-u's shadow, and since she was being fed, she had become a bit plumper and more adorable compared to the first time he saw her.

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“Chou-u, you brought Miss Pairin’s breakfast porridge, didn’t you?”

He didn't ask Zulin because she couldn't speak.

“Yes, I got them. Was there a problem?” Maomao was a little irritated because Chou-u was now looking three centimeters taller than her, but she couldn’t do anything about it. From now on, he would probably continue to be taller than her.

"Porridge was prepared for the troublesome customers."

"Eh?"

His "huh?" didn't seem like an attempt to ignore him. His face reflected confusion.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“But there was something mixed in there,” Maomao insisted. Even if Chou-u didn’t understand, she would have to keep investigating.

“Zulin, did you do something?”

Zulin shook his head.

“Ah, but…” Chou-u, as if he had remembered something, clapped his hands.

“The porridge was already prepared from the beginning.”

"Were you ready?"

Zulin also nodded.

“The old lady told me to go have breakfast and when I got there it was already ready, so we got it.”

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Zulin nodded again.

“Does that mean that Chou-u and the others brought breakfast for the guests that the other courtesans had prepared?”
Pairin mused as she played with Zulin’s cheeks, who couldn’t resist. Maomao also remembered how they played with her the same way when she was little.

Preparing the porridge was the job of the apprentices, but the mid- and lower-ranking courtesans were usually in charge of preparing it themselves. Besides Lihaku, there were other regular customers, and if one of them was a troublesome customer, it wouldn’t be uncommon for them to mix sleeping pills into the porridge.

However, they would not leave porridge for bad customers simply unattended. "If the porridge dries up, it will be unpleasant. If you feed a customer bad porridge, he will be angry, and he will also be angry if you waste the porridge.
So I brought them first,” Chou-u said.

There were no contradictions in her story. The old woman always told the courtesans and maids not to waste food.

“I asked Zulin to bring the porridge. They are not lying,” the old woman added.

The old woman appeared.

"You did well not to waste it. But now the question is, who was the useless courtesan who left the porridge unattended?"

The old woman took a notebook from the desk drawer. Beside the table was an incense holder for measuring time.

“Let’s see… Besides Lihaku, there were five other customers who stayed here this morning. But none of them seem to be problem customers.”

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There was an incense burner for each of the six customers, including Lihaku. One of them was much more elaborate than the others, probably belonging to Pairin, who was a high-ranking courtesan.

“Aren’t you a customer who’s been acting badly lately?” Maomao suggested.

“I don’t think so, but you can check it yourself,” the old woman handed the notebook to Maomao.

“I hardly recognize any of these names,” Maomao said.

Besides the customers, Maomao only recognized the names of two of the courtesans who were there before.

“We can’t keep the same girls forever,” said the old woman.

“That makes sense,” Maomao replied.

Some courtesans were released, others moved to other establishments. If they managed to retire without problems it was fortunate, but many were unable to continue working due to illness or, even worse, died.

"Hey, do you have a floor plan of the second floor rooms?" Maomao asked.

"What do you want this for?" asked the old woman.

“Just give it to me,” Maomao insisted.

After reviewing the plan, Maomao walked out to the courtyard.

"What are you doing?" asked the old woman, following her curiously.

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“I will confirm some things with my own eyes.” Maomao moved just below Joka’s room. The old woman, intrigued, followed her.

“If he jumped out of the window, there should be footprints around here,” Maomao said.

“There was a light rain two nights ago,” the old woman commented.

The ground was still wet.

(If someone had come down from the third floor, they should have left clear footprints on the floor.) However, there were no obvious traces.

"No one other than Pairin saw the thief?" Maomao asked.

"No, no one else."

And the men? Didn't you see them either?

“There’s usually no one around here in the morning. But those useless squirts with the sieve eyes... They needed a good beating.”
The old woman’s eyes lit up. Although she seemed strict, the men also had the responsibility of ensuring that the courtesans did not escape. If they let a thief escape so easily, there was clearly a security issue.

"Have you discovered anything?" asked the old woman.

“I need to investigate a little further.”

"What else is there to investigate?"

“On the second floor, just below Joka’s room.”

The old woman did not try to stop Maomao. On the contrary, he seemed to look at her with the expectation that she would already find the culprit.

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Chapter 8: The Missing Thief – Part Two

Maomao moved to the second floor. The private rooms on the second floor were smaller than those on the third. It can be said that the size of the room directly reflected the status of whoever occupied it.

The smallest room in the House of Verdigris was barely big enough to sit and drink tea and sleep in. Because they were so small, there was no room to store many belongings, and since they did not earn enough to buy their own clothes, the courtesans often shared their clothes among themselves.

The rooms below Joka's were relatively spacious, occupied by the courtesans of highest standing in terms of sales.
Still, each was only a third the size of Joka's. In short, beneath Jokah's room were three bedrooms.

Maomao, meanwhile, knocked on the door of the middle room, just below the window through which the thief had escaped.

“What do you mean you’re going to inspect the room?” the courtesan who was practicing her erhu asked, her eyes narrowed suspiciously. She had arrived at the Verdigris House after Maomao had started working at the palace, and although they were the same age, she did not have a good opinion of Maomao.

To Maomao, the House of Verdigris was her old home, but to the new courtesans she was nothing more than a stranger who came and went without being one of them.

“A thief escaped through Joka’s bedroom window, so I want to inspect from downstairs,” Maomao explained.

"If he jumped out the window, shouldn't you check the yard?" replied the courtesan.

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"I already checked the yard."

Despite her elegant appearance, clearly the result of her good sales, the courtesan had a strong character. However, Maomao also grew up in a brothel and had experience of palace life.
He was not intimidated by the interlocutor's words.

“I have the old woman’s permission. Move now.” Maomao looked at the old woman, who was watching her from below.

"Okay, okay. Come in and check whatever you want." The courtesan, clearly frightened by the lady, immediately retreated.

Maomao went in to inspect the room. Inside were a bed, a table, a few chairs, a writing desk, and a chest of clothes. The faint aroma of incense was not unpleasant. From her skill with the erhu and the atmosphere of the room, she had probably been raised in a wealthy family. (It is common for daughters of ruined families or widows from good homes to be popular here.)

In high-end brothels, intelligence and composure were valued. Some dishonest clients found it fascinating that someone from the upper class had sunk so low.

As for girls of the same age, those who came from good families were sold for a much higher price than peasant girls. Furthermore, it was easier for the brothel to educate them.

(Perhaps it would have been better if she had been sold to the palace), Muhammad thought. If she became a palace servant, she would have a better future than being a luxurious courtesan.

Maomao opened the window. Just above was Joka’s room. He leaned over and held out his hand.

(I couldn't, but a nimble man could.) He took a quick look around the room.

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"How are you?" the courtesan asked.

"I'm done. I'm going to the next room," Maomao replied.

"I'm asking how you are!" the courtesan insisted.

"Nothing special. Oh, one question: what were you doing from last night to this morning?" Maomao decided to confirm just in case.

"What did I do? Do I have to tell you everything?"

"I'm just checking to see what you were doing when the thief snuck into Mrs. Joká's room or jumped out the window. You must have heard something."

"I was with my clients, of course. I had two last night."

It was not uncommon for courtesans to serve more than one client per night.

"And at dawn?"

“...I was in the common dormitory with the apprentices.”

"Why?"

"Why do you ask?! The two side rooms are always occupied. Do you think I can sleep well like this?" (I understand perfectly) Although they are private rooms, the walls are not very thick. If you hear groans from either side while you are trying to sleep, it will be hard to miss. A downside of being raised with good manners.

“Yes, yes, I understand.” Maomao left the well-mannered courtesan’s room.

After the central room, Maomao knocked on the door of the left room.

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“Yes?” The one who came out was the eldest sister, Zulin. She was the same girl who Maomao helped get her position as a courtesan. Perhaps he felt a bit of gratitude towards Maomao, since he didn’t look down on her like the previous courtesan.

(She looked like a walking skeleton.) Now she had gained some weight and was more voluptuous than Maomao. He had heard that she was selling well, and seeing how it had changed, he understood.

"Let me see your room."

"Suddenly? Explain it to me first."

Zulin’s sister, like the previous courtesan, was hesitant to let Maomao in. But after mentioning the old woman, he reluctantly agreed. The room also had a faint aroma of incense.

Maomao sniffed as he observed the room carefully.

"What have you done since last night until this morning?"

"Do I really have to tell you?"

At least it seemed that her manner of speaking had been corrected by the old woman, but unlike the previous courtesan, the room’s decor was messy and chaotic. Here and there it was noticeable that the cleanliness was poor, with clothes spilling out of the trunk and stains on the floor. Although her appearance had improved, her refinement still left much to be desired.

Although his appearance had improved, his refinement was still developing.

"You heard that a thief broke in, right? So, under Mrs. Joka's room..." The next thing was the same explanation he gave

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to the previous courtesan. Zulin's elder sister began to speak reluctantly.

“I had five customers last night. The last customer stayed in the morning because he didn’t have much time.” “Five? Isn’t that a lot?” Maomao observed her carefully. He was still young, with smooth skin. However, his eyes were a little red. Being a courtesan requires stamina. The more customers, the more the body wears out.

"I'm not like others. I don't know how to play erhu or go, I have no choice but to accept more customers."

“You are young now, but you will soon wear out,” Maomao tried to warn him worriedly, but it had the opposite effect.

"So what should I do? Learn to read at this point? Take hours of sleep during the day? It's impossible. If I don't increase sales, Zulin and I will be kicked out. Or do you want Zulin to also work on this to make money?"

Zulin's elder sister replied to Maomao, almost hurriedly. His obsession with sales was due to the presence of his sister, Zulin. Even though their biological father had abandoned them when he knocked on the brothel's door, he couldn't leave his sister behind.

“Besides, Miss Pairin also makes money with her body. There are days when she has more customers than me, why can’t I do that?”

"That's true." Maomao said nothing more.

(Pairin is special) She possessed beauty, stamina, and a proper personality, everything a courtesan should have from the start. The difference in their initial abilities was considerable. This young woman, raised by despicable parents, survived by protecting her dying sister and had nothing but eyes full of ambition and

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greed. Muhammad, who did not work as a courtesan, had no right to lecture her. He had said too much.

“So you didn’t see the thief enter or leave Mrs. Joka’s room early in the morning, did you?”

"No. And now, could you go? Because of the commotion this morning, I couldn't sleep."

“Ah.”

Zulin's sister stretched and fell onto the bed as she yawned. The quilt had been replaced with a new one, but there didn't seem to be time to stretch it properly. I would definitely have many more clients today.

(I hope he doesn't bring any strange customers) Maomao went to the next room. In the last room on the right was a veteran courtesan whom Maomao knew well.

"Que?"

The courtesan had a dazed face, as if she had just woken up. She was two years older than Maomao and had been in the Verdigris House for more than ten years. She did not have the striking appeal of the three princesses, but she was known for her conversational skills and customer service, attracting many scholars.
Since she rarely went to bed with clients, she was good at keeping herself healthy.

She was an exceptional courtesan who managed to maintain a steady stream of clients.

“There was a thief in Mrs. Joka’s room. He escaped through the window, so I came to check the rooms downstairs.”

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Instead of responding with “Understood,” the courtesan invited her in with a gesture. Maomao was surprised to see that the courtesan used to chat a lot with customers, but was so quiet in her free time.

"Well, I'll go in."

Maomao checked the room. At first glance it seemed simple, but it was tastefully decorated. Customers who didn't have a good eye would scoff at the austerity of the place and leave. The Silent Courtesan's sales policy was that they only wanted customers who knew how to appreciate the value of things.

The size of the room was the same as the other two. There was a bed, a table, a chair, and a desk, as well as some furniture he had bought himself. On a shelf was a vase with a snowflake-shaped flower displaying a beautiful star-shaped flower. Although the brown vase was simple, he had received it from an experienced customer. It was the size of a palm, but it was said to be worth as much as several horses.

Maomao opened the window and, as in the other rooms, checked the bars and the surrounding walls.

"When the thief escaped this morning, didn't you hear any noise outside the window?"

"The customers left. I was having breakfast."

Apparently he was having breakfast because the customers had left.

"You didn't see or hear anything, did you?"

"Sim."

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"Thank you." Maomao silently left the courtesan's room.
“Ah…” Maomao, with a voice of disbelief, comes down. He goes to the room where the lady is.

"Old."

"Have you found out anything about the thief?"

"I think I can find out, so show me the records."

"...There is no other choice." The old woman hands Maomao an account book bound with low-quality paper. She opens the last page of the book to check which courtesan was with which client and on which dates.

"Is Ukyou here?" Maomao mentions the name of an old acquaintance.

"Yes, yes, and him?"

Only then does the head of the Casa Verde staff arrive.

"Can you track this client? He's probably using a fake name." Maomao points to the client's name written in the book.

“Well, I’ll do my best. If not, the old lady will get angry,” Ukyou replied.

“I won’t scold you. I’ll just lower your salary.” The old woman shook her pipe, letting the ashes fall out.

“That’s cruel,” Ukyou said as he left Verdigris House.

The old woman checked the name of the client and the courtesan who had served him.

"We better prepare the cell."

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"In moderation, yes?"

"I won't hurt you. They're work tools." The old woman took the key to the punishment room from her pocket and went up to the second floor.
Maomao followed her. The courtesans who were watching trembled with fear.

Why couldn't they follow the thief's tracks? The answer was simple: there was an accomplice on the scene.

“Now what do you want?” Zulin’s sister asked, looking visibly annoyed as she waited for a client in her room.
However, upon seeing the old woman behind Maomao, his expression changed, becoming alert. Behind her, the other courtesans gathered around, wondering what was going on. Everyone was just curious.

"What... what's going on?"

Maomao abruptly entered the room and looked out the window. On the lower frame there were some dark red stains, and on the floor there was also a similar reddish stain.

"That's blood, right?"

"What about this? It's because of an injury I had."

“The thief who entered Mrs. Joka’s room was looking for something and messed it up. In doing so, he hurt himself by stepping on it.” Maomao showed a broken hairpin that had been stepped on. The broken part of the hairpin had dried blood stains.

“The thief took advantage of the moment when Joka was in the bathroom and climbed in through the window. Climbing in with shoes is not easy, so he probably took them off, and that's why he escaped through the window again."

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“And what does this have to do with me? It’s not uncommon for the window frame to be dirty.” Zulin’s sister, now clearly hostile to Maomao, began to speak more abruptly.

"You brought the thief to your room as a client. And you collaborated with him?"

"What nonsense are you talking? What would I gain from this? Does the old woman also think I'm part of the group of thieves?"

“I don’t care which side you’re on,” said the old woman, “but I don’t forgive anyone who hurts my business.”

The old woman was scary because of this. Maomao also felt some fear, as she herself had introduced Zulin’s sister. If it was discovered that he had done something wrong, the consequences could be serious. However, there was something even more important that needed to be resolved.

“I heard your sales have been increasing lately, right? Maybe you’re looking to fill the empty room on the third floor now that Miss Meimei has been bought out.”

In the brothel, competition was fierce. If a courtesan improved her position, her clientele also improved, which meant that prices went up. In many cases, to move up, it was easier to push others down. (In your case in particular, you could only increase your sales by using your body.)

However, even if her sales had increased, the old woman would never consider her one of the new Three Princesses. Although she had attracted many customers, it was more about quantity than quality, and compared to the other two, Zulin’s sister was at a disadvantage.

He thought that if he could lower Joka's status, he would be able to advance. What would happen if the valuable jade tablet that

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Joka used in his business disappear?

(But that wouldn't diminish Joka's value)

However, Zulin's sister, who has complexes about his origins and upbringing, would probably like to get something out of him.

But Zulin's sister is cunning. He's not the kind of person to confess just because of the bloodstains on the window frame.

“Other courtesans have had clients here too,” Zulin’s sister replied, “why do they only suspect me? There were others who had been here too, and I’m not the only one with a room below Joka’s. What about them?!”

Zulin's sister pointed to the silent courtesan and another one playing the erhu. When they are pointed out as 'those', they both frown.

“I didn’t have any clients today, nor was I in my room”

“Wow, what a shame, so few customers,” Zulin’s sister replied sarcastically.

“What did you say?!”

The erhu courtesan bared her gums in a gesture of fury, and if she hadn't been restrained by the servants, she would probably have struck Zulin's sister.

(She is good at teasing)

Azilin's sister's quick response seems like a counterpoint to her sister's lack of words, which is much more expressive.

"I, impossible."

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“This woman’s client has disappeared,” Maomao added. The silent courtesan's regular customer had already left before the thief entered. Since the woman was not very communicative, Maomao had to complete the information. "And couldn't he have left in a way that made it look like he was gone, but in fact he stayed?"

The silent courtesan shakes her head at Zulin's sister's words.

“It is impossible for the customer to stay.”

“This morning’s client was a gourmet with a refined palate.
“He was so well fed that he couldn’t have jumped out of the window,” Maomao said, checking the list of customers in the account book. If you asked the old lady, you would immediately know what kind of customers they were.

“Well, if you ask me, the thief was quite thin,” Pairin added.

Zulin's sister glared at Maomao.

“You decided to conspire, either because you said so or because you were informed that a client was going to break into Miss Joka’s room.” Maomao returned the gaze firmly.

“First, they confirmed the time Miss Joka would take a bath and planned to act when she came out. But Miss Pairin’s client was still there and they didn’t want her to notice any noise. pill for bad customers in the rooms.

Add? How?

"It's easy. You work to support your sister, so you should know what she does."

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Apprentices bring breakfast to high-ranking courtesans. They know what time to bring the breakfast porridge, so they just have to put the porridge mixed with the sleeping pill in right beforehand.

“As they were trained by the old lady, if there is fresh and hot porridge, they will bring it first. If the customer is an accomplice, the courtesan will not complain if he leaves the room. Unfortunately, Pairin gave Mr. Lihaku his own breakfast, so he did not fall asleep and noticed the noise in the next room.

"Wow. At first glance it seems like it makes sense, but isn't it just based on assumptions? Where's the evidence?!"

(I thought you would say that) Maomao began to sniff. As he moved around the room, he stopped at the spot where the smell was strongest. It was in front of the chest that contained the clothes.

"Thieves are not stupid. When they break in to steal, they certainly choose clothes that will not attract attention if they are seen." (It was a brown outfit. It was a flash and I only saw the back, so I couldn't see what kind of jacket he was wearing, but he was wearing a hakama underneath.) Maomao remembered Pairin's testimony.

As common as these items are, if he was wearing the same clothes when he broke in, it would raise suspicion. So...

Maomao dropped the trunk.

"What are you doing?"

Zulin’s sister tried to stop Maomao from checking the trunk, but she pushed her away and took out a brown jacket. It was a man’s garment.

(As I suspected) Maomao sniffed the jacket.

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“Miss Pairin, doesn’t it look like a thief’s outfit? It’s a thief’s jacket.” man.

"Ah, it seems so."

“It’s similar! Actually, there’s a lot of men’s clothing, right?

Some customers forgot their clothes, and sometimes the courtesans exchanged their own clothes with the customers. The thief could have used a forgotten jacket for the robbery and then returned here to change before leaving.

“Yes, there are many similar clothes, but…” Maomao sniffed the jacket. There was a strong scent different from body odor.

“What’s that smell? It smells like an intense fragrance.”

"Fragrance? That's my perfume."

"Realmente?"

Maomao brought the brown jacket to Joka. She, with disgust, picked it up with her fingertips and sniffed it.

“Wow, so that’s your perfume,” Joka said.

“Yes,” Zulin’s sister replied.

“But it smells like an imported perfume that a customer gave me. Does that mean the shopkeeper who said it was a one-of-a-kind piece is lying?” Maomao noticed the fragrance as soon as he entered Zulin’s sister’s room. Although the room was not yet fully decorated, there was a strong scent of expensive perfume that was the same as the one he had smelled in Joka’s room.

To be sure, Maomao also went to check the silent courtesan's room.

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Joka, throwing off his jacket, stood in front of Zulin's sister.

"You can't make any more excuses."

Joka’s eyes were cold. The next moment, Joka’s slap hit Zulin’s sister’s left cheek, and she turned to the side. Without wasting any time, Joka’s right hand also hit her right cheek.

"It hurts, it hurts!"

"..."

Joka continued to knock silently.

The old woman did not stop the action. Since Zulin's sister had done something wrong and Joka had only slapped her, a fight between courtesans was permissible, as long as no other method of violence was used.

“If you beat it too much, won’t it swell?”

“Anyway, we won’t let her go out in public for two or three days.”

In other words, he was allowed to hit as he pleased.

"What? What's going on?"

Chou-u and Zulin also arrived at the scene of the commotion.

"¡!?"

Zulin ran away when he saw his sister being beaten by Joka. He started beating Joka, protesting that he should stop beating his sister.

"Get out of here! Do you want me to slap you too?" Joka tried to push Zulin away.

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Zulin's sister kicked Joka in the stomach as hard as she could. Joka was thrown back, spitting saliva.

“What are you doing!” The old woman grabbed Sister Zulin’s hair.
"DON'T TOUCH ZULIN!" Zulin's sister shouted in a booming voice.

"I didn't want to do that either! But I had no choice! Isn't that what you have to do to make money? What's wrong with that?"

Zulin's sister with bloodshot eyes continued her speech.

“If you don’t go up, just go down. I’ll do whatever it takes to survive as a courtesan. There’s no room for idealism here. Everyone here thinks that way, to a greater or lesser extent! Your customers pay well. If the prices increase sales, they give us an extra plate of food.”

The surrounding courtesans frowned at Zulin's sister's words.

"Everyone thinks so! If I hadn't done it, someone else would have! I'm sure everyone thinks the veterans clinging to the top of this old brothel are a nuisance."

"Be quiet!" The old woman spoke in a low voice.

"Who is the second-rate who can't take down these veterans on their own merits? The fact that you can't do it shows that you are the one to blame."

The old woman laughed disdainfully.

"Hey, what are you guys doing standing there like idiots? Get her out of here.
For now, she needs a character correction.
We will decide your punishment later."

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The old woman ordered the men.

Zulin's sister was led to the punishment room, while Lihan, snot dripping down his throat, clung to the old woman's feet, but was pulled away by the other courtesans.

"Zulin, pare, pare."

Chou-u tried to calm his subordinate, but Zulin could only make unintelligible sounds.

Maomao watched from a corner.

The punishment that the old woman would apply would be applied in a way that would not interfere with business. However, acts that resembled torture would be carried out, as an exemplary lesson for the other courtesans, so that they would not repeat the same behavior.

It was something inevitable in the world of courtesans.

Chapter 9: The Courtesan's Farewell

As Zulin's sister was taken away, Joka, who had been kicked in the abdomen, slowly got up.

"Are you well?"

“Yes… Maomao, do you have a moment now?” Joka rubbed her belly. Despite being the victim, she coldly glared at the back of her attacker.

"Is there anything else left?"

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"No, well... There's something I'd like to ask you. Could you come to my room?"

"All good."

Maomao went to Joka's room.

Joka's room was still messy because of the thief, but around the table and chairs everything was clean.

"Sit down."

Maomao sat down on one of the chairs.

Joka turned the futon into a bed. As he moved one of the exposed planks of the bed, a cloth-wrapped package appeared, which he placed on the table.

"So that's what the thief was looking for."

A broken fragment of a jade tablet emerged from the package. It was the same one that Maomao had seen a few days ago.

"How is it here? Wasn't it stolen?"

"I heard about the police officer who was killed recently. I had a bad feeling. So I took the jade plate out of the puzzle box, hiding the token under the futon, while leaving the box at the back of the closet. When you make a living using fake names, you develop a certain kind of intuition, and sure enough, the box was stolen."

Maomao looked closely at the broken jade plate. Its surface was scratched and worn. Although the jade was of good quality, the token itself was no longer valuable, and on top of that, it was difficult to work. It didn't look like it could be exchanged for money. However, it could have another purpose. Joka was born in a brothel.

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His mother was a courtesan and his father was one of the clients. The only thing that man left behind was that fragment of the file.

Joka's name was inappropriate. Traditionally, the character "Ka" was only supposed to be used by the imperial family. However, Joka's father was said to have belonged to a distinguished lineage, and as proof of this, he had left the token. That is why she used the character "Ka" in her name. This was the background of her character.

However, Joka did not believe that he was part of the imperial family. He thought that his mother had been an idiot who had been deceived by some client and that they had left her a stolen token or something.

Still, shrouding her image in a somewhat mystical aura was not a bad strategy for attracting clients. Joka exploited the story that she might be an illegitimate daughter of the imperial family as part of her business dealings.

"Maomao, you know how I sell myself, right? That thing about me being an illegitimate daughter of nobility is just a publicity stunt. I was fine."

"But it seems that someone has appeared who really wants to know if it's true, right?" Maomao crossed his arms. He knew of other incidents related to the imperial family that happened around him, besides Joka.

(Could they also be investigating Tianyu?) Previously, I heard that Tianyu might be a descendant of a certain Kada, supposedly an illegitimate descendant of the imperial family.

"So, what was that soldier's name? He was one of Joka's clients and was murdered in that eccentric strategist's office..."

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“You’re really bad at remembering names, huh? His name was Fang.”

"Yes, that one!"

Joka shows no interest in his customers and maintains a cold attitude, but he actually remembers their names well. However, he doesn't show it and usually calls them by nicknames that he makes up.

(He also doesn't call people by name) At that moment, Maomao notices a strange connection with Tianyu.

"He wanted that token and was killed for it. And now, they tried to steal it. Even someone as ignorant of the outside world as I am, who has never left the brothel, can understand that."

(Speaking of which...)

The three maidens who murdered the military officer seemed to be connected to the Shin clan, or at least that was what Lahan mentioned.
Maomao wondered what had happened to this. He did not receive any further reports.

"The thief probably broke the puzzle box. What do you think he will do when he finds out there was nothing inside?"

It was likely that they would try to steal Joka's jade plate again. This time, they could resort to more aggressive methods.

"It's time to retire." Joka raised both hands. "I have saved enough and there is nothing more valuable than life."

"It's time to stop using this story of the illegitimate daughter of the nobility as part of the deal. I should have done this long ago. I know it won't be easy to erase this reputation I've created among clients, but withdrawing it immediately is the best option."

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With an exhausted tone, Joka picked up a fallen book from the floor and began to turn the pages. The paper looked like it wasn't of good quality as it was a bit worn and frayed around the edges.
It was probably one of the manuscripts he copied in his youth, when he had no money.

The book appeared to be a hand-made copy from the time when Joka had no money.

"A courtesan's life is short. It would be easier if she finished everything at once, but instead, she slowly wears herself out, fraying at the edges. It's pathetic to think that with a few patches, you can still keep going."

Joka turned a page and the old, brittle paper tore.

"Are you going to retire?" Maomao asked.

Joka tilted his head doubtfully. "That can happen. A prostitute in her late thirties doesn't get many new clients. Some imperial examination students might come for luck, but they don't become regulars."

A prostitute's retirement is inevitable. However, Maomao felt a certain sadness.

“I’m going to get rid of this jade tablet. I can’t say that I have absolutely nothing to do with it, but it’s important to convey my intention, don’t you think? As an illegitimate daughter of royalty, please spare my life.”

"Yes, you're right." Joka continued, "I know you have connections with important people at court. And yes, I'm also counting on that pervert with the monocular glasses. I know it's a difficult thing to ask, but I only know life inside the brothel. I don't have anyone else." "To turn to, more than you."

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Although Joka had always been a strong woman, her voice showed a small hint of vulnerability.

"How could I refuse?" Mohammed replied.

Normally, Maomao would have thought it was a pain.

“I will personally handle the disposal of the jade plate. I will inform someone I trust.”

Maomao wrapped the jade plate in a cloth and put it in his pocket. Although it was a small plate, only three inches long, it felt strangely heavy.

(If I have to trust someone with this...) He immediately dismissed the eccentric strategist. No one in their right mind would put a spark in a gunpowder warehouse.

He knew several high-ranking people, but there was one who fit in better than any other.

Jinshi’s image appeared in his mind. If anyone could be well-versed in the ins and outs of royalty and noble families, it was him. Furthermore, for better or worse, he was a person of integrity.

He turned a blind eye to the Shi clan's children, hid Suirei, who had connections to the imperial family, and also gave shelter to a former priestess of Sha'ou.

(I don't want to overwhelm, but...)

Maomao felt the weight of responsibility, but he knew that he had to act immediately for Joka’s sake. If he didn’t hurry, Joka’s safety might be in danger. However, it was indeed a difficult matter to resolve.

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(I only saw him two days ago...)

Furthermore, Maomao still felt a little uncomfortable after refusing to spend the night with her.

Chapter 10: Signature Returning from the brothel to the lodging, Maomao called for a carriage. Partly because it was late to return, and also because it would be troublesome if something happened to the jade tablet he was wearing. He had decided that it wasn't worth saving on the cost of the carriage, but…

"Miss Maomao, I've come to pick you up!" The one who arrived with the carriage was, for some reason, Chue.

"Why are you here, Miss Chue?" Maomao asked with genuine curiosity.

"Oh, my. Are you not pleased with my presence?"

"I heard from Miss Maamei that you were in another job."

"Work finally finished this morning. Ugh, I'm exhausted, exhausted~" Chue gave her shoulder an exaggerated pat.

"I also heard from Miss Maamei that Lihaku had kidnapped her. And, well, I felt with my supernatural abilities that several things had happened, so I came to get her."

Even for someone as capable as Chue, this excuse was very suspicious.

"Hey, isn't there someone playing spy around here, spreading information to strangers?"

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“Wow, Miss Maomao, how suspicious you are!” Chue said as he pushed Maomao’s back. Since he couldn’t use his right hand, he only pushed with his left.

“As you can see, I can’t work like before anymore, so I’ve been fired from my position as Prince Luna’s assistant. Therefore, from now on, I’ll be with you more often, Miss Maomao. Waiting for me at home, a duck that eats a lot~”

(The duck must be from Basen)

Maomao decided that boarding the carriage was a good idea, as it would save on the cost of travel.

"Should we go back to the lodge?"

"No. Um, well, would it be possible to go see the Moon Prince? Although I didn't tell him..." Maomao said this with some discomfort.

“Ah, Prince Moon...” Chue smiled mischievously. “Can I lend her one of my more revealing sweaters that Chue seduced her husband with?”

(It’s nothing like that) Maomao silently pulled Chue’s cheeks. To what extent was the information about her and Jinshi shared? This was very uncomfortable.

"P-Pare! Pare!"

“Now, how are you?” Maomao released Chue’s cheeks, who rubbed them.

"...Haaah, it was just a joke. They might make you wait a little, but it'll probably be fine. Leave it to me."

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“I’ll give it to you.” Maomao bowed his head to Chue. Just as she had said, they made her wait inside the carriage.

(Did he not get permission?)

If you can't, there's not much you can do. Maomao was torn between the relief of being able to see Jinshi and the discomfort it caused her.

(Instead of taking the hit, throw it first) The day before yesterday, she approached Jinshi with that intention, but was rejected. It was both a relief and a disappointment at the same time. I was thinking about what expression to use at the next meeting, but I thought there was still time.

Seeing this in less than three days would be uncomfortable.

(Well, if I see it as a job...) Maomao breathed in and out lightly. I just had to treat him like before.

“Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao” Finally, Chue returned.
He entered the carriage with a load in his hands.

“Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao! Here’s what you asked for, the transparent —!”

"I don't want this!"

Maomao patted the cloth bundle Chue offered him.
It might seem a little rude, but he figured that being Chue, he wouldn't mind.

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"Miss Maomao, don't you think you're being a little harsh on Chue?"

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“No, no, I’m treating Miss Chue properly. More importantly, were you looking for this? You’ve made me wait for a long time. Maomao had been waiting in the carriage for about half an hour.”

“Eh-heh” Chue looked away and stuck out his tongue. He had a knack for irritating people.

“I’ve done my job! Now let’s go to Prince Moon.” Chue signaled the driver to go ahead and picked up the package that Maomao had dropped. “First, this…” Chue took out a transparent cloth and something that looked like a string of beads.

Maomao threw them away again.

“Ai, ai, how cruel. I really wanted Miss Maomao to feel this transparent texture. Her courage was extraordinary.”

“Isn’t it a mistake to wear beads instead of underwear?” Maomao said.

(Well, it's not like I've never seen him in the red-light district.) It would be a bit of a squeeze for him. Other than that, Maomao had no further opinions on the matter.

“Ugh, the pajamas, at least feel the texture of the nightgown,” Chue begged, clinging to Maomao.

"So, just a touch of the texture of the sweater."

"Yes, of course!"

“The way it’s woven is quite peculiar, isn’t it?”

"That's right. Please take a closer look."

Between one thing and another, they arrived at the Jinshi Palace.

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“Prince Luna! The faithful and wise Chue has brought Miss Maomao!” Chue seemed to act more freely than before. Before, she showed some fear towards Suiren, but perhaps she felt more confident now after being seriously injured. Or perhaps it was because she was no longer Jinshi’s assistant.

"My God, what a bold tone."

Suiren appeared without making a sound, watching Chue with a smile. A drop of sweat ran down Chue’s cheek, so he really should be more careful not to overdo it.

(This woman is A-Duo's mother) Maomao remembered what he heard from Maamei and felt uncomfortable. Not that it was a secret, but he decided not to show anything on his face.

“Maomao, please come in.”

Guided by Suiren, she walked in. A familiar security officer accompanied her. There was no sign of Taomei; perhaps he had already retired.

Jinshi was sitting in his usual chair, with his typical arrogant attitude. However, as soon as he saw Maomao, he looked away, as if he felt somewhat uncomfortable. On the other hand, Maomao felt... Although there was some discomfort, it was not as intense as she imagined. It was like the laziness you feel when you come back to work after a day off.

“I heard there was an urgent matter. What is it?” Jinshi asked with a tone that showed his nervousness. Although Maomao was calm, it seemed that Jinshi still felt uneasy.

Maomao didn't know how to start the conversation. He hesitated for a moment, but finally decided to take out the jade box that Joka had entrusted to him.

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“Does this sound familiar to you?”

“A jade amulet?” Jinshi narrowed his eyes as he took the item from Maomao.

“The surface is scratched and damaged and appears to be broken.”

“It seems like it was already broken from the start.”

Jinshi watched her carefully as she meditated.

“Um, what is this? It looks like an object with a complicated history.”
Jinshi ran his hand through his bangs, pushing them away from his forehead.

“This… was an amulet that belonged to a well-known person,” Maomao said, thinking about how he should explain this.

“The woman who gave birth to that person was a courtesan, and apparently one of her clients gave her this amulet. “That client claimed to be an illegitimate child of the imperial family.”

Maomao decided to be honest, although he avoided mentioning Joka's name. He knew that if anyone investigated, they might find out, but he chose not to say so.

“It’s a pretty common story,” Jinshi commented, turning the broken jade tablet in his hands to examine it from different angles.

“The person in question is not posing as a member of the imperial family nor is he trying to blackmail anyone. He only asked me to keep this amulet because he didn’t want anyone to see it and think the wrong thing,” Maomao explained carefully, choosing his words.

“For him to claim to be part of the imperial family… it’s not entirely impossible,” Jinshi said, his eyes taking on a much more serious expression, like when he was working.

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"Suiren."

"Sim."

When Jinshi raised his hand, Suiren brought out paper and writing utensils.

“There is a pattern next to it.”

Jinshi narrowed his eyes and began to look at the side of the token.
Then he started drawing the pattern on the side.

"Hum."

“What is this?” Suiren asked, leaning in to take a closer look.

“What could it be?” Chue was also interested.

It wasn't clear to Maomao, but it looked like a pattern that resembled characters.

“Master Jinshi, what is this?”

“It looks like a signature.”

“A signature?”

A signature is a type of symbol used in place of a name.
It is originally created by distorting characters, so that it can look like both a character and a pattern.

It seems that Jinshi recognized part of the side drawing as a signature. For an ordinary person like Maomao, a signature was unfamiliar and she was confused between the patterns, so she didn't notice it.

“Did you get it right?” Maomao was genuinely impressed.

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"There are many who use signatures instead of seals. They show me dozens every day."

Maomao remembered the times he saw Jinshi's desk always cluttered with documents.

“Also, my jade plate has something similar engraved on it.”

Suiren got up and brought a box of paulownia from somewhere.
Inside was a jade plate.

"You?"

On the side of the Jinshi jade plate, there was also a similar pattern engraved. It was larger than the broken jade plate and decorated with even more meticulous and precise work. The engraving showed a four-clawed dragon, very similar to the one on the broken tablet.

After Maomao saw it, Suiren put away the jade plate again.

"...Do you know whose signature this is?"

"It doesn't look familiar. But..." Jinshi pointed to the top of the drawing he had drawn.

"There are many different types of signatures. Some are stylized versions of cursive handwriting, some are a single distorted letter, and some combine two characters of the name."

Maomao had no idea of this kind of knowledge.

“Would that be a combination of two characters?”

"Yes, probably."

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Jinshi began to draw something close to the personal seal he had made.

“The combination of two characters is called nigÿtai and consists of fusing the left side of one with the right side of the other, or sometimes, as in this case, combining the upper and lower parts.”

"¿Superior e inferior?"

The part that Jinshi added resembled a kusanakanmuri (the grass radical in Chinese calligraphy)

Maomao sweated slowly.

“This seal is common among the imperial family,” Jinshi said.

"S-Seriously?"

On the Jinshi jade plate there was also a similar design.

(Wow!) Maomao remembered Joka. Although she had hinted that she was a descendant of the imperial family in her business dealings, if that were true, what would happen? Although she had already considered it, facing this possibility in reality made her nervous.

“I have a question. Who owns this plaque?” Jinshi’s face, which had been showing discomfort until recently, changed completely. He was now focused on the matter at hand, proving himself to be a hard-working man who prioritized solving the problem over any personal discomfort. “If you find out who the owner is, will you punish him?” Maomao asked anxiously.

Although he thought Jinshi was not like the other officers, he did not want to betray someone close to him. He was worried about what would happen to Joka if something went wrong.

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“Did the owner steal this token?”

"No. As I mentioned before, he received it from a customer. Maomao heard that Joka's mother received it from a customer."

“However, it seems that on some occasion he showed the badge to other customers and this caused rumors to start circulating that he might be a descendant of the imperial family. Joka had not spread these rumors herself; it was more that customers assumed and misinterpreted it.

Maomao tried to choose words that would leave a good impression, but it seemed that Jinshi had understood the situation.

“In short, do you think the existence of this jade tablet has become a nuisance to anyone?”

“Exactly!” Maomao let out a sigh of relief. Jinshi didn’t seem bothered by the fact that someone might have used the imperial family’s name.

"A thief came in looking for this broken jade tablet. They may try to use more aggressive measures to obtain it in the future. That's why they decided it was safer to get rid of the tablet."

"Are you absolutely sure that was the badge they were looking for?"

"Yes. Recently there was someone interested in purchasing the jade plate. And that person was..." Maomao tried to remember the name he had almost forgotten.

“A military officer named Fang.”

"Fang? You mean Wang Fang?"

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"Yes. He is the man who was assassinated in the strange strategist's office." Jinshi, with his sharp intelligence, probably had a better understanding of the relationships between people than Maomao.

“So, you mean to say that Wang Fang was looking for a descendant of the imperial family and it cost him his life?” “I don’t know.
I'm just saying it's a more coherent story than his murder at the hands of the women he was involved with. Maybe those women were just used as tools to gather information." The people who killed him were still out there in prison.

"I see. So who owns the plaque? You still haven't told me clearly who you got it from."

"Aren't you going to punish the owner of the sign?" Maomao insisted.

Although Jinshi could easily find out the identity of the jade tablet's owner through his information network, Maomao wanted to ensure that there were no misunderstandings.

“Are you so suspicious of me? Do you trust my judgment so little?” Jinshi frowned slightly. Although Maomao thought that she shouldn’t anger him, she felt that it was important to draw a clear line in this matter.

“You have your own role and responsibilities, Master Jinshi.”

In her role, Jinshi sometimes had to make difficult decisions and mete out ruthless punishments. Maomao felt that if she didn't clarify some points, it would be easier to leave some loose ends.

“I will do nothing to harm you. Nor the person who entrusted you with that plaque.”

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Jinshi, being who he was, was probably telling the truth.
Even though the matter was complicated for him, Muhammad knew that he would keep his word.

"..."

The two looked at each other.

“Come on, come on.” It was Chue who intervened between them.

“Master Jinshi, I understand that you want Miss Maomao to tell you everything, but it seems that she feels that you don’t trust her.”

"That's how trust works, isn't it?"

“Well, isn’t it more of a dominance than a trust?” Chue’s words made Jinshi shudder.

“Wanting to know everything is an action that disarms and exposes the other person.
Even though you think there won’t be any problems as long as they’re under your protection, do you really give Miss Maomao any choice in all of this? Sir, always…
It’s a form of slavery, being under the Moon Prince’s rule.”

Jinshi's face turned slightly pale.

“I understand that Miss Maomao also wants to reduce the burden you carry, Sir, but sometimes it’s a bit, you know, too much.”

"Too much...?" Maomao narrowed his eyes.

“Well, if one is going to deal with someone like the Moon Prince, it’s only natural for everyone to talk about what they should. Oh, by the way, Chue doesn’t intend to say anything else.” , Please don't punish me.

Having said what he wanted, Chue took a step back and cast a sidelong glance at Suiren. She, without changing her expression, left the room.

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Jinshi's room. Chue sighed in relief and exhaled deeply.

"Then, Chue takes her leave." Chue followed Suiren out of the room, making it clear that she would not interrupt anymore.

Now, there were only two left in the room, but their thoughts were focused on the jade tablet.

Jinshi frowned, as if he had just tasted something bitter, but a few seconds later his expression returned to normal.

"Has the owner of this sign done anything for which he should be punished?"

"No, not at all."

(It should be fine...) Maomao thought with relief.

"Then it's no problem. If necessary, I was planning to get an escort."

"I think the owner would reject it."

"I'll keep the jade plate in mind. Also, maybe it will increase security in the red light district."

"That would help me a lot."

It seemed that Jinshi had no intention of continuing to pressure Maomao. “We can’t just rely on the signature. We must consider other aspects. The material is jade, as well as nephrite, and its color is intense.” Jinshi continued to describe the characteristics of the jade tablet, as if he was checking them out loud.

“Anyway, if it were you, you would have already thought of the possibility of it being an imperial plaque, right? Even if you don’t know the details of the signature, you should have guessed it.”

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"Yes, I considered the possibility of it belonging to someone of very high standing."

The real possibility of it being the imperial family was frightening.

“Also, the fact that it was cut, carved and broken suggests an internal conflict. They wanted to hide it, but they couldn’t just throw it away.”

It seemed like Jinshi and Maomao were thinking the same thing.

“It is possible that he was an imperial descendant who broke the tablet to avoid getting involved in internal conflicts.”

"That possibility is quite high."

“In that case, it will depend on the weather. In recent years, it would be hard to imagine. Unless His Majesty has mingled incognito among the people.”

Given the emperor's personality, it wasn't entirely impossible, but it was unlikely.

“It is unlikely to be from His Majesty. They say it was received nearly thirty years ago.”

“Thirty years…”

Jinshi twirled the brush between his fingers. The tip of the brush was quite dry, so there was no danger of any paint splashing. However, if a drop fell, it would be frightening; Jinshi’s robe was equivalent to a commoner’s one-year income.

Maomao felt a shiver and took the brush away from Jinshi.

“I think the possibility of it being from the previous emperor is also very low.”

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"I know."

The previous emperor was known for his fondness for young girls, so one can't imagine him getting involved with Joka's mother. Furthermore, it didn't match the appearance of the man who was said to be Joka's father. (He looked good, but he was a dirty man, right?) He didn't look like a member of the imperial family at all.

“Furthermore, I was told that it was already broken and worn when you received it. Since it’s a jade tablet, could it have been passed down from generation to generation?”

“The closest moment would be that of the previous emperor.
There were certainly some members of the imperial family left before they were forced to become monks.”

“It is the era of the reigning empress.”

The previous emperor ascended the throne because his half-brothers fell ill. However, it is said that the surviving male members of the imperial family were eliminated so that they would not pose a threat to the previous emperor.

(I don't know to what extent this is true)

If the true owner of this plaque, who was a member of the imperial family, was one of the previous emperor’s half-brothers, he would certainly be embroiled in family disputes. If this was the reason why he decided to get rid of his status by destroying the plaque, it might have been a smart decision. However, it would have been safer to get rid of it immediately.

“When it comes to jade, it is difficult to determine the era.”

If it were woven it would be even lighter. The patterns and weaving methods vary depending on the era.

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“No, maybe I can do that.” Jinshi observed the side carefully.

“If it is a jade plaque from the imperial family, the craftsmen are limited. With this kind of design, they must have kept a record so that it would not be confused with those of other members of the imperial family.”

"Then..."

“Yes, I’ll keep her to investigate. By the way…”

"What's wrong?"

It seemed like there was something else bothering him as he looked at Maomao.

“Yesterday and today, it seems like you attended a meeting of influential people.”

"Yes. I was tricked by Lahan." "Lahan, huh? It's true that he would like to take you to this kind of meeting."

“It must have been exhausting, with so many things happening.” Jinshi spoke to Maomao in an encouraging tone.

“But hey, I saw a lot of things. I think it was a good experience. Master Basen was also there.”

"Really? I wish I had gone too."

“No, Master Jinshi, I shouldn’t have gone.”

"Why not? People from other families should also attend."

"What would a boss think if he suddenly appeared during a party his subordinates were enjoying?"

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Jinshi remained thoughtful. He was probably thinking of a strange boss like the strategist.

"Maybe they think you don't understand the situation?"

"I don't know. But the best thing would be a boss who pays and leaves."

“That’s sad!” Jinshi looks at Maomao with an irritated expression.

Maomao smiles slightly.

However, there were some gazes watching them.

"Wow, they don't seem to be moving forward."

"They are both obsessive about work."

Chue and Suiren, who were spying on the room, were not noticed by Maomao and Jinshi.

Chapter 11: The Apprentices

As Maomao spent his days busy, the season changed to early summer. In the humid air that clung to his body, he worked.

She was focused on the task of taking care of the huge pile of accumulated clothes, trying to put everything in order.

"At least with the clothes..."

“Unemployed medical apprentices…”

"...they should be able to handle it, right?"

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Maomao dipped the clothes into a large barrel filled with water and, barefoot, stepped on them to wash them. The blood and pus-stained bandages, as well as the doctors' uniforms, were piled up like a mountain, making her sigh in exhaustion. In fact, someone should do something to stop so much laundry from piling up so quickly.

Yao and En'en were also going through the same thing, struggling alongside him with effort. Although Maomao had recently been assigned to a different medical room, they gathered around the large well that provided the clothing to divide the work.

"Maomao, you're splashing water everywhere!" At the side, Yao, who was being splashed, narrowed his eyes with an expression of resentment.

"I'm sorry, just wash it faster this way." What Maomao was trampling on were the doctors' lab coats. If he devoted himself to washing them carefully just because they were his superiors' clothes, he would never finish. Blood stains become more difficult to remove over time.

"Maomao, please don't throw dirty water on Miss." En'en was also frowning, concentrating on rubbing a bloodstain incessantly. Maomao was in charge of the doctors' gowns, Yao washed the bandages, and En'en took care of the minor stains.

Maomao moved the bucket away from Yao's position and stepped back onto the surgical gowns.

"It would be very helpful if we had white radishes to remove blood stains. We've used them before, right?"

He was referring to the use of grated radishes to remove blood stains.

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"That's because-" Yao looked away uncomfortably.

“Last summer, we used radishes to remove blood stains, but since the stains didn’t come out well, we ended up using too many radishes,” En’en answered for Yao, explaining the situation.

"And now they're banned, aren't they?"

"Sim."

Daikon (white radish) is originally a winter vegetable.
Although some varieties can be grown in spring and summer, it is a valuable resource, so it is to be expected that they would become irritated if they used it excessively. "I think we'll have to remove the stains manually, with patience."

“Let’s do it like this.”

"OK."

Maomao and the others continued to wash themselves as they exhaled deeply. Although it appeared to be the same work as always, there were some small differences.

"Excuse me, we've finished boiling the bandages."

The speakers were two girls of fifteen or sixteen. Their eyes still maintained the innocence of youth.

Hiring new assistants to work with the doctors did not end with Maomao's group. Now, two new recruits have arrived.

(What were their names...?) Unfortunately, Maomao wasn't very good at remembering names and faces. He vaguely knew that they were his younger companions, but little else.

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“Then, could you also take care of boiling these?” Yao handed the freshly washed bandages to the new recruits. Due to both her age and position, she carried herself with a somewhat condescending attitude, as if she were an older sister.

"Understood." The two new recruits picked up the basket with the bandages without saying anything.

"Vaya."

"What's wrong?" En'en looked to see Maomao's face.

“I was thinking some very obedient girls have arrived.”

Court ladies often saw their work as part of their training to become wives or as a way to seek out their future husband. Furthermore, since many of them came from wealthy families, they tended not to have the right personality to meekly perform manual labor.

"There were other girls too. But on my first day I kicked them out." Yao let out a disdainful sigh.

"Did you drive them away?" Maomao remembered that this had happened before.

"It's not that I fired them. I just transferred them to another department."

“And these two are the ones left?” “Mhm,” Maomao nodded. They looked like simple girls. It wasn’t that their faces were dull, but they still had an air of inexperience.

One of them was short and had her sleeves rolled up, while the other was tall and wore her well-fitting work uniform.

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"Yes. Though one of them was a lady of the inner palace."

"Lady of the inner palace?"

"That's right. The highest is Yo, and the lowest is Changsha.
Surely, as always, you didn't remember their names, right?"

"Ha ha ha"

(Oh right... the tall one has a short name, and the short one has a long name), Maomao thought, recognizing that Yao knew her very well.

“In the inner palace they teach the employees a little bit of everything, right?
I was very smart, so much so that they offered her to stay as a maid in the palace.”

"Really? I always thought they kept the most talented ones in the harem."

The period of service in the inner palace was two years. Daughters from poor families were simply released after that. It seemed that Jinshi’s attempt to increase the literacy rate so that they could get jobs during this period was bearing some fruit.

“It is said that Yo refused to stay in the inner palace. Apparently, she moved to the capital because she could earn money at court, since she is very attached to her family. as much as possible.”

“That is filial piety,” Muhammad replied sincerely. However, there was something about Me that bothered him.

“Won’t it be hard for you to wash clothes in those clothes?” Maomao commented, looking at the young woman with the short name, who had her sleeves pulled up to her wrists. At this time of year, the heat from the boiling cloths must have been stifling.

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“I told him that,” Yao replied, “but he told me that exposing skin is prohibited. So I couldn’t say more.”

“That makes sense.”

The country of Li was vast, and the capital attracted people from all over, with its own customs and rules. Exposing skin was seen as indecent in some places, and small feet were considered a sign of beauty. Although there was a saying that wherever you go, do as you see, Maomao believed that it was not always necessary to force someone to conform.

(If she does her job well, there should be no problem), she told herself as she continued to wash the clothes.

Since returning from the western city to the central city, Maomao has taken on more responsibilities in managing the pharmacy.
Although he enjoyed his new role, the amount of herbs and medicines he had to manage was overwhelming. He was constantly on the move.

You should check the stock and expiration date of ingredients, discard expired medications, and order any missing ones.
Also, you cannot run out of commonly used medications; if they are missing, you must prepare and store them.

He had to check the stocks and expiration dates of medicinal herbs, throw away those that were spoiled and separate those that were missing. It was also essential to maintain a constant supply of basic medicines, so if any of them were running out, new ones had to be prepared.

Fortunately, the room where the herbs were stored was in a well-ventilated and cool area. In addition, it had an attached preparation room. Nearby was a well with water and a stove, and

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Every now and then a doctor specializing in the kitchen would offer to prepare lunch.

(Next time, I'll ask En'en to prepare something)

Managing the medicine shelves was not Maomao's sole responsibility; other doctors were also in charge of this.
However, if Muhammad left everything in the hands of others, she would run the risk of being removed from the tasks entrusted to her, and that was something she wanted to avoid. Therefore, she made sure to keep everything in order.

Having wasted some time on the task of washing clothes, Maomao was now working diligently to make up for lost time.

(There are no pills... I must prepare them)

Maomao gathered the necessary ingredients on the table. Just as he was trying to reach the pestle that was on top of one of the shelves, he noticed a shadow approaching from outside the room.

“Uh, this… what should I do with this?” The youngest apprentice, the one with the long name, approached Maomao carrying a basket full of dried herbs.

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“Allow me.” Maomao picked up the basket full of dried herbs. A faint, fresh scent tickled his nostrils.

The apprentice had received the requested medicinal herbs, but she didn’t know what to do with them. When a doctor who prefers to teach by example gave vague instructions, the result was this problematic situation. “They told you to store them, right? If you leave them like that, they take up a lot of space and will spoil. You can also help while you do this, or even mark them.”

Maomao picked up a bunch of dried herbs and pinched off a few leaves. They were quite dry, so it didn't seem necessary to leave them in the sun any longer.

"Separate them between leaves and stems."

"Sim."

"When you're done with the leaves, put them here."

Maomao took out one of the drawers from the medicine cabinet and placed it in front of the apprentice. The young woman looked very serious, or perhaps just nervous, because she didn’t say anything. Although Maomao preferred to work in silence, when it came to an intern, he had no choice but to make sure she learned something.

"Do you know what plant this leaf is from?"

"¿Menta...?"

"Correct."

The question was so simple that the apprentice answered immediately.

"And what is its use?"

“At home we used it as a remedy for coughs and headaches.”

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"At home?" Maomao stopped and looked at the apprentice.

"Does your family have a pharmacy or something?"

Maomao showed a little interest.

“It’s not a pharmacy, but my grandmother was a witch.”

(Oh right... he was that type) Maomao was a little disappointed to see that he didn't come from a family of doctors.

In villages with small populations, there were often no doctors or pharmacists, so local elders or witches often filled this role.

Maomao didn’t believe in magic or anything like it. Most of it was unfounded and often used to deceive people. However, he couldn’t completely reject it either. At least, from the knowledge this apprentice displayed, it seemed like her grandmother had been a decent witch. It was probably thanks to her that the young girl had passed the written examination in medicinal herbs.

(It seems worth teaching him) Maomao remembered when he had to force Sazen to learn what was needed to run the pharmacy in the red-light district. This girl seemed much more willing to learn.

“Well then, I’ll make some daily medicine, so help me out.”

"Understood."

The new assistant followed Maomao, diligently imitating his movements. Maomao picked up the medicinal herbs he had left on the table.

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Suddenly, a wobbly, jellyfish-like creature approached them.

"Hey, hey! What are you guys doing?" Needless to say; it was Tianyu.

“Niang Niang is teaching the new girl? Since it’s the one with the long name, is it Changsha?”

(This guy doesn't remember my name, but he remembers hers...)

The new assistant’s name was Changsha, that’s right. However, if Maomao responded, Tianyu would have fun doing more nonsense, so he decided to ignore him.

“Yes, I am learning from Miss Maomao.”

"Ha ha ha! Niang Niang has a habit of starting to dance when she sees rare medicinal herbs, so be careful!

"Hahaha! Tianyu has a habit of dancing when he sees a fresh corpse, so be careful." Maomao also replied.

"Huh? Medicinal herbs? Corpses?"

Changsha looked back and forth between Maomao and Tianyu, clearly confused.

"Please stop interrupting, the new girl is getting confused.
Couldn't you go do your work already?" Maomao put the dried leaves into the mortar and began pounding them, producing a grinding sound.

“First, we crush them all before mixing them. We must make the powder as fine as possible.”

"Understood."

“Uh, huh…” Tianyu, unfazed, interrupted her again.

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(Oh, right, this guy...) In the western city, he heard that he was a descendant of Kada. I didn't know how true this was, but since Joka's story didn't turn out to be entirely false, it could be true.

(I don't know if Tianyu knows Wang Fang) However, when Wang Fang was killed in the strategist's office, Tianyu treated him like a mere corpse. If he knew him, he would probably have shown a more appropriate attitude.

As Maomao pondered, his hands did not stop.

“Once it is powdered, we will mix it according to the proportions. We will use cooked honey to bind it together.”

Maomao lifted a pot of thick, viscous liquid.

“What is cooked honey? Is it a type of honey?”

“It’s honey that has been reduced. If we use it as is, it has a lot of moisture, so we evaporate it first.”

"Ah, I understand."

"Hey, hey!" Tianyu didn't give up and continued speaking.

Maomao mixed the powder of various medicinal herbs with the thick syrup. At first, as if he were making macaroni noodles, he stirred it until it fell apart and then kneaded it into a block. A mass with a clay texture and characteristic aroma was being created.

"You want a hardness similar to that of an earlobe. The wooden mold is on the shelf, so, uh, doctor there!
Please bring me the wooden mold. Finally, Maomao guided Tianyu.

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“You just call me now,” Tianyu muttered, but he seemed happy to finally be recognized, so he went to look for the mold.

"Thank you. You can do something else now."

"Isn't it a bit cruel how you treat me?" To Maomao, it was the usual way of treating Tianyu, but Changsha apparently felt uncomfortable with the conversation.

"D-Doctor Tianyu. Thank you. You've been a great help."

"Hehe, it's okay."

“I heard that although you are still young, you are already doing the same work as mid-level doctors. Especially in surgical procedures, it is said that you are exceptional,” Changsha said.

"Uh, yeah, kind of."

Tianyu, seemingly not used to receiving compliments, smiled strangely, making a “nihi nihi”.

"How can I improve the accuracy of executing procedures?"

"Ah, that is... when it comes to corpses..."

Maomao quickly kicked him in the shin.

"Oh!"

Tianyu hugged his leg and started jumping.

“What the hell are you doing, Niang Niang!?”

Maomao shows his teeth to intimidate him.

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(Why the hell are you talking about dissecting cadavers?) It's a secret that doctors practice dissection. It's not appropriate for Changsha, the new intern, to know.

“Hum? Ah…” It seems that Tianyu finally realized this and blinked a few times. He has an annoying demeanor, unlike Chue.

“My family is a hunter. So I’m used to dissecting animals.”

“Does being good at dissection help in surgeries?”

“Yes, because there is a big difference between being used to blood and not being used to it.”

As Maomao heard from Doctor Yang in the western city.

“So your parents are hunters?” Maomao acted as if it was the first time he heard this.

"Sim."

“So, can I visit your house sometime?”

“Hey? “With my parents’ permission?” Tianyu said this with an exaggerated tone, looking at Maomao with shining eyes.

"No, that's not it. I was just thinking about buying fresh meat. It's not easy to get into the capital, right?"

“Ah…” Tianyu understands that Maomao is looking for cattle to dissect, while Changsha probably thinks that Maomao wants meat to eat.

Maomao's real motive was to find out what Tianyu's family was like.

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“I would like to give you something, but I can’t. “I’m on bad terms with them.”

“That’s a shame.”

Maomao did not stop. He continued to press the pill-shaped piece of grass into the mold, pushing it firmly to produce the pills.

"Well, it's time for you to go. The busy doctor has other work to do."

"Hey! I'm helping you!"

“No, no, it’s okay. After I return to the center, I will report to Doctor Li, who is still training his muscles.
Recently, he hung a large sandbag from a tree in his garden and started punching and kicking it. -stop. Also, it seems that he also goes to the training ground in his spare time to practice with the military.
Do you want to become a punching bag?

“Hey, how scary!”

Court physician Li seems to be leading a full life, though we may wonder where exactly he is headed.
Tianyu, on the other hand, seems to be no match for him
and hurriedly leaves.

“Doctor Tianyu is a strange person,” Changsha says.

“Yes, it’s better not to get involved with him.” Maomao continued to make the pills.

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Chapter 12: Work in the Training Camp Infirmary Within the vast palace, there are several medical rooms. The busiest of them all is near the military training ground.

"Hey, I have a huge cut on my head! Stitch me up!"

“I dislocated my shoulder! Put it back in for me!”

“A newbie has fainted! Bring me a tonic!”

These things are our daily bread.

Basically, it's a place where new doctors are sent for training. Also, it's a place where medical interns on probation aren't placed. There are a lot of tough guys around here.

"I think it's time you gained some experience," said court physician Liu, assigning Maomao, who had returned from the western capital, to this ward full of tough guys.
It was probably also intended to prevent the eccentric strategist from taking up residence in the previous wards.

“If any problems arise, please speak to Li Court Doctor.”

When a woman is assigned to such a difficult place, various problems arise. Court Physician Li, who openly opposed Maomao’s going to the Western City, seemed to care about her deep down. She probably thought that Court Physician Li would protect her in that harsh environment.

“If there is any problem, please tell me.” Unlike before, Court Doctor Li now recognizes Maomao.

(Court Doctor Li is really a good person) He is a bit unyielding, but he is serious and has an unbreakable heart. In fact, even

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in a doctor's uniform, his muscles are so visible that it becomes increasingly difficult to tell whether he is a doctor or a soldier.

"Well, you don't really need to ask for help, because I don't think anyone would dare to bother you."

It is said that behind Maomao you can see the ghost of a man with a monocle.

The fact that Maomao was assigned here is probably due to the perception that, despite her character, she is less likely to cause trouble compared to the lovely Yao and En'en. So Maomao works in this hectic environment.

Today is also busy. Emergency patients have been arriving since morning. “Wow, what a noisy crowd early!” said a senior doctor in a relaxed tone. He was an elderly doctor, with a mild air and a unkempt beard. Apparently he slept in the ward last night and this morning he was sitting on one of the patients’ beds, eating.

Although his appearance makes you wonder if he can handle himself in a room full of tough guys, watching him work, you immediately realize that he is very capable.

“I’ll change for a moment, please take care of the patients in the meantime.”

"Understood."

That morning, Maomao and Court Physician Li were the only ones on duty. The other doctors were either busy with other tasks or their shift started at noon.

"Hey! A wooden sword stuck in the stomach. Do something," explains a soldier who brought in a patient, giving a

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quite alarming description.

"A wooden sword in the stomach?" Maomao and Court Physician Li ask as they examine the patient they just brought in.

Regardless of how you managed to get something like this stuck inside you, you need treatment.

"Ugh... ugh...", complains the injured man, a young soldier who has not yet reached adulthood. He is sweating coldly and groaning in pain.

“Please explain the situation to us in detail,” they ask the police officer who brought the injured man, as the patient is unable to speak.

“It’s as you can see. He got hurt during training, what else is there to say?”
The police officers who brought the injured man left the infirmary without further ado. Their irresponsibility knows no bounds.

"What's wrong with these guys?" Doctor Li reluctantly frowns, but focuses on treating the injured man as a priority now. At this moment, the bearded old doctor, who seems to have finished changing, slowly arrives.

“It looks like a broken wooden sword was stabbed into it.” What Maomao was pointing out was something seemingly obvious, but of great relevance. The sword had not broken when it was stabbed, but it was already broken when it was stabbed.

Both Court Doctor Li and the old doctor seem to understand what Maomao means and nod their heads. Why would a broken wooden sword stab itself during training?
The explanation is too insufficient. Did he accidentally fall on a broken wooden sword? No, it looked more like he had been nailed intentionally.

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“I’ll get everything ready for the surgery. You two, clean the patient’s wound,” the old doctor said as he took instruments from a large shelf.

Doctor Li and Maomao lay the injured man on the bed, remove his upper clothes and expose the wound.

“For now, let’s remove the wood fragments.” Maomao began to pull out the larger pieces by hand. They were covered in blood and difficult to remove. For the smaller fragments, he carefully used tweezers.

“There’s a lot of bleeding. First, let’s stop the bleeding.” Court doctor Li pressed the wound with several layers of bandages. The pressure on the wound was essential to stop the bleeding.

“With the skin so torn, it will be difficult for it to heal properly,” Maomao says. It would have been better if the cut had been clean.

“We will remove the excess skin and then suture it. The question is how to do it.”

If they simply joined the skin together, the wound would be too tight because there wouldn't be enough tissue. They had to make a special cut to be able to join the edges together without tension. This meant they would probably have to make a new incision.

“Are the internal organs intact?” asks the old doctor as he returns with the surgical instruments.

“Despite the bleeding, the wound is not very deep,” replied Dr. Li, after examining the patient.

“The suture will be done by me and court physician Li. Maomao, bring the necessary medicine to stop the bleeding.”

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"Understood. Will you need some kind of anesthesia?"

"That won't be necessary"

Despite his good-natured appearance, the old doctor could be quite harsh with his patients. Maomao felt a little sorry, but it was not an uncommon scene when it came to military officers. These men, who could be sent to the battlefield at any time, were accustomed to pain and anesthetics were rarely used.

(Let's see, which medicinal herbs have a hemostatic effect?) He thought of horsetail, artemisia, cattail... There were also substances of animal origin, such as ejiao, a gelatin made from donkey skin.

(Fortunately, this season is in abundance) Although many medicinal herbs are difficult to obtain depending on the season, it is a relief that from early spring through summer there is a relative abundance.

In the next room, another doctor, back at work, joined the old doctor to assist with the operation. Since no anesthesia was used, there was a risk that the patient would become agitated during the procedure. For this reason, the operating table had restraints to immobilize his limbs. Apparently, he was also gag to prevent him from biting his tongue, as only muffled screams could be heard.

Maomao was assigned to that ward for a short period.
Yao and En'en would certainly pass by here at some point as well.

(I think En'en would handle it well.) And Yao, with his tenacious personality, would find a way to endure it as well. But what would happen to the two apprentices? I didn't want them to give up because of the hard work, but it wasn't a matter of being too lenient with them either.

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While thinking about the future, Maomao went to get the medicine.

The suturing was apparently completed quickly. The floor was covered in bloody bandages, and the young officer, with his abdomen freshly stitched, had the misfortune of urinating on himself. This was not an uncommon occurrence, so there were always a change of underwear and pants in the infirmary. Maomao took them along with the medicines and left them on a shelf.

“Will these medications be enough?” he asked, showing the hemostatic, antiseptic, analgesic and antipyretic ointment he had gathered.

“Oh, excellent,” the old doctor replied. “Court Physician Li, please transfer the patient from the operating table to the stretcher. Ah, Maomao, take care of collecting the bandages and instruments.”

"Yes sir."

Maomao threw the bloody bandages into a basket. “Do you know how to boil and disinfect instruments? If possible, I would like you to do so.”

"Understood."

The old doctor seemed to be a meticulous person. He gave clear and precise instructions, which was appreciated. There have been many people in the world who have told you to think and act for yourself, but then punished you for taking liberties. The patient might be difficult, but the court doctors were, for the most part, competent. It was probably due to the good guidance of the old doctor. Maomao considered that his current mission was not bad, except for... having to be close to the eccentric strategist.

The arrival of wounded continued. The sun began to set and Maomao finally managed to take a break. Ironically, it was thanks to

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figure of the man with the monocle, behind her, who began to insinuate himself into her peripheral vision.

“Hey, Maomao…” Court Doctor Li looked alternately at Maomao and the eccentric strategist.

“Please don’t even mention it,” Maomao replied.

Maomao began to prepare tea. The old doctor, finally off duty, took a sip of hot tea and let out a sigh of relief.

"It's been a tiring day, hasn't it?"

"Yes, but a great opportunity to learn."

“You really came back as a new person, Court Physician Li.”

Court physician Li's robust build, the result of a diet of soybean powder and goat's milk, still seemed full of energy. He seemed able to continue working tirelessly.

“But the situation in the army has been strange lately, don’t you think?”

"Strange? You mean there are a lot of intentional injuries?"

Maomao hesitated for a moment before speaking, but in the end, Court Physician Li nodded, confirming his suspicions. It was obvious even to the two of them, who had only been in office for a short time, that there were many wounded with suspicious injuries.

"You noticed." "Yes... Well, today's wound, with the broken wooden sword stuck in... it looked very intentional."

"Is this some kind of covert harassment?"

It was also suspicious that the police officers who brought the injured left without giving any explanation. If they were colleagues, they should have handled the situation with a little more courtesy.

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"This is not just harassment, but factional fighting."

“Do you fight between factions?” Court physician Li and Maomao tilted their heads in unison and then directed their gazes towards the suspicious individual lurking behind them.

“Is there something wrong, Maomao?” the eccentric strategist asked with a mischievous smile.

Maomao ignored him and turned to the old doctor.

“For now, it’s just skirmishes between the lower ranks,” the old doctor explained.

"Why is this?" Court Doctor Li frowned, his expression worried.

"In nature, when a large predator is on top, it often regulates the balance of power among the prey below."

"I understand."

Maomao and Doctor Li once again briefly glanced at the suspicious individual behind them.

“Over the past year, this predator has disappeared and prey have begun to fight each other for territory and resources.”

"I see."

The old doctor explains clearly, without mentioning specific names.

"And although prey may look the same, they are not all the same species. In the absence of the predator, some prey became stronger and began to attack others."

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“And these new predators are now acting as they please, right?”

"Exactly."

“It’s troublesome, but don’t you think things will calm down eventually?”

"I hope so."

Maomao thought that once the predator, that is, the eccentric strategist, returned, the ecosystem would return to normal. However, the old doctor's tone suggested that things were not so simple.

She crossed her arms, thoughtful.

(Now that I think about it…) The head of the U clan said, “It seems that I am hated in the new military faction.”

Could it be related?

“Is something bothering you?” Doctor Li asked, sensing that the old doctor wanted to know what was going on in Maomao’s mind.

“Anyway, I’ll tell you before you hear it. The two main factions currently dividing the army are… the Empress Dowager’s family and the Empress’s family.”

The Empress's family refers to the You clan. The new faction mentioned by the head of the U clan must have been the Empress faction.

“Well, if we include the neutral faction that doesn’t belong to any of them, that would be three.”

“Wow…” Maomao couldn’t help but let out a surprised exclamation.

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The old doctor looked at Maomao and then at the eccentric strategist who was watching them from the shadows.

"This is getting interesting."

“It’s a worrying matter, don’t you think? Anyway, do you understand where I’m going with this?” The old doctor looked at Maomao.

"Control the predator with cunning and do your best to calm this chaos."

"..."

Maomao could not help but express an expression of utter discontent.

Chapter 13: The Duel and Its Price The fighting between factions in the army continued day after day.

At first, Maomao did not quite understand what the Empress Dowager faction and the Empress Dowager faction were. However, working near the training ground, I inevitably heard talk of it.

The empress's faction was none other than the well-known Empress Gyokuyou, who needs no introduction. Of course, instead of Gyokuyou being up to something, it was his father, Gyoku'en, who was involved. His western relatives began to occupy positions at court. Furthermore, it seemed that Gyoku'en had the support of civil and military officials of humble origins who had risen up the social ladder, as well as relatively new noble families. They were known as the "new faction".

The Empress Dowager's faction focused on the Empress Dowager's family, Anshi. Although Anshi's family had already occupied high positions

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positions, they were not particularly notable. It was said that this was because they were detested by the previous Emperor, or rather, the Empress. It was not as if the Empress Dowager could fully trust her own family. It was understandable, since an Emperor with a penchant for girls would hardly trust the parents who sent him their own daughter.

However, in the Empress Dowager's faction is Great General Lu. He was originally a military officer, but he quickly rose through the ranks after protecting the young Empress Dowager and the current Emperor. Unlike the Anshi family, he enjoyed the favor of the previous Empress Dowager, which was an important factor. In addition, the old clans, dissatisfied with the new faction, often tended to support the Empress Dowager.

Therefore, in order to reduce friction, it seems that it was decided to raise his rank from Grand Marshal to Grand General, in conjunction with transforming the You clan into a noble family.

Although key figures on both sides remained cautious, the youngsters engaged in continuous skirmishes on the training ground.

These two factions supported different candidates for the position of next emperor. The Empress's faction, of course, supported the current crown prince, Empress Gyokuyou's son.

On the other hand, the Empress Dowager's faction did not look favorably on the Crown Prince, whose Western blood was very strong. They had Consort Lihua's son, a prince of the same age, as their candidate, which made it unpleasant that the emperor's brother had been in the position of crown prince for so many years and had now changed.

(The imperial prince was the son of the empress dowager, while the crown prince was her grandson. As relatives, it was easier to intervene directly in politics if the heir was a son.) Muhammad, aware of the

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truth about the imperial prince, could not help but display a blank expression.

As for the neutral faction, there is not much to comment on. Muhammad did not understand politics. Then he could only focus on doing the work in front of him.

"Hey, there's an emergency patient!"

When called out loud, Maomao puts aside his review of the medicine stock. They had so many similar emergencies that sometimes it felt like I was living the same day over and over again.

The patient they brought in had a bruise between his chest and abdomen. It was a circular bruise of a purplish color. He was a young man in his early twenties.

(I've seen this somewhere) Maomao narrowed his eyes. It looked familiar, as if he had seen it recently, but he couldn't place it.

"It looks like he's been in pain for a while."

"Yes, quite a while ago, actually." Instead of the patient, the man accompanying him responds in a polite tone, unusual for a military officer.

(And this other man?) The companion, who was smiling affably, also looked familiar.

“Lord Ujun” He is Lishu’s half-brother and a young man who was often used as an example by the U clan chief.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Miss La, I appreciate you remembering my name. However, I'm no longer allowed to use the character U. If you prefer, you can call me Jun."

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Ujun adopted a humble attitude.

Seeing him, Maomao remembered the meeting of nobles a few days ago.

(Ah, that's expensive!)

The injured man was the man from the love letters, the one whose real name was unknown and who harassed Yao. Last time, it was Lahan's brother who beat him. Who would be responsible this time?

“Ugggh,” the man groaned.

Bruises usually hurt more after a while, but the situation still felt more serious than a simple blow.

"My ribs..."

"Are they broken?"

"They could have cracks. It was thrown with a lot of force"
While the man in the love letter can only groan, Ujun responds. Since it was released, it doesn't seem like Ujun has been the
cause.

“What hit you? It doesn’t look like the mark of a wooden sword.”

“It was bare knuckle.”

“Pu… clean fist? A bear attacked you?” The bruise was so severe that even the normally serious court physician Li made such a playful comment.

Maomao blinked in surprise.

Leaving the treatment for now to court Doctor Li,
Maomao prepared bandages to immobilize the ribs and cloths

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cold to reduce swelling. If there was internal damage, they would also need surgical instruments.

"How are you?"

"There appears to be no damage to his internal organs, but of course we need to monitor his progress. I need you to help me immobilize him."

“What about cooling the affected area?” Unless it was a member of the imperial family, it was difficult to use ice for military injuries. The most they could do was use cold water from the well.

"Get some wet cloths ready. No, I need painkillers before that."

It seemed that the priority was to immobilize the bones before applying cold.

"Understood."

Court physician Li, although he had developed an obsession with muscles in the western capital, was a very sensible doctor. It was good to see how he treated the patient without losing his cool. It seemed that the man in the love letter had no damage to his internal organs as he had been taking his medicine normally. However, he could not give any explanation as to how he had been injured.

"Did you get hurt during training?"

"Yeah, well, you could say that."

Ujun responds ambiguously. Furthermore, Maomao is surprised that Ujun is a military officer. He has an attitude that can be described as friendly at best or indecisive at worst. His build is much thinner than that of Li's court physician.

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"We had a little dispute and decided to settle it with a fight."

In other words, a duel, Muhammad thought.

(This guy seems to have a penchant for dueling)

He seemed to have some confidence in his abilities, but once again he faced a formidable opponent.

“What do you mean by 'a fight'...?”

The man with the love letters spoke with difficulty between moans.

“This guy is a monster, he broke my wooden sword into pieces with his bare hands.”

"With your hands?" Maomao tilted her head, puzzled. I had heard something similar before.

(Who was it…?) He was about to ask who it was when Court Physician Li stepped forward.

“First of all, why did there happen a dispute?” Depending on the case, you will have to inform your superiors. Lately, injuries related to disputes between factions have been frequent and he had to file a report.

“It was nothing important.” Ujun seems uncomfortable with the situation.

"HOW IS THIS NOT IMPORTANT?!" The man with the love letters exploded in anger. It seemed like his stomach still hurt, as he screamed while holding the affected area.

“How can you stand there so calmly when they are mocking your own sister?!”

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“I don’t care what they say about Miss Lishu now.
In fact, I think it would be more unpleasant for Miss Lishu if they considered me part of her family. “So you’re saying that you got angry and challenged them to a duel because they insulted your friend Doctor Li’s sister, looking to the man in the love letter for confirmation.

“No, that’s not the case,” Ujun corrected.

“Yuen made fun of my younger sister. A military officer passing by became furious and started fighting with him, and he lost,” Ujun explained.

So Yuen was the name of the man in the love letters. However, Maomao decided that it was not worth remembering.

“…What? Wait a moment,” Court Physician Li said, tilting his head in confusion. Maomao did the same as he tried to understand the situation.

"Let's see, first, you were the one who insulted her sister."

“That’s right,” Ujun replied.

"And you were the one who insulted her."

"Exactly," the man in the love letter agrees.

“And then a third person passing by got angry, started a fight like a duel and resulted in a serious injury, and the relative of the person who was insulted came here as a companion.”

"Sim."

Court Physician Li and Maomao lowered their heads in unison, puzzled.

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“Don’t you think you’re a very good person?” Maomao asked, looking at Ujun.

"That's not the issue. The Shin clan and the U clan are in the process of reconciliation. I cannot allow my actions to be perceived as something that could harm my clan," he replied.

In other words, even if Lishu felt insulted, Ujun couldn't just abandon someone from the Shin clan, no matter how distant they were.

(What would the clan head think about this?)

After everything that had happened, the head of the U clan had become quite tolerant towards Lishu. It would probably have been better for him to let go of the man in the love letter who had insulted Lishu.
"Be that as it may, I would like to know who is responsible for the injuries."

"... Down..."

"Que?"

“It was Basen…” The man in the love letter replied in a dejected voice.

"Sr. Basen...?", Maomao repeated.

“Ah,” he exclaimed, understanding instantly.

I thought the injury was serious, but if the opponent was Basen it's not surprising. More like I thought the injuries were terrible, but if Basen was responsible it made sense. You could even say that...

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“You should be thankful that your internal organs weren’t destroyed,” she muttered to herself. She remembered with nostalgia how Basen had snapped that thief from the Western Capital’s arm like a twig. And if memory serves, he’d also snapped a lion’s nose.

Basen certainly held back, because walking away with only a few broken ribs was incredibly lucky.

"What was I supposed to do...? I covered myself with the wooden sword! And he still broke it and left me like this...! Ugggh complained, although it seemed like he still didn't have the strength to do so!" shouting at the top of his lungs.

(Although he lost to Lahan's brother, he must have had a good foundation as a warrior.) Personality aside, there was no doubt that the man in the love letters was skilled.

As if ordering him to shut up, Court Physician Li tightened the bandages he had placed on him even more.

(If you faced a bear in a man's skin, there's nothing you can do.) Simply surviving an encounter with Basen was worthy of admiration. He deserved applause just for coming out alive.

“Furthermore, I’m surprised that you dared to duel with Mr. Basen. I thought your reputation as a warrior was well-known among the military.”

“Lord Basen often imposes unfavorable conditions when facing other warriors. Unless his opponent is exceptionally skilled, he fights without weapons, only with his fists,” Ujun explained. (He is a monster.) He had recently lost to a farmer, and now he was defeated by a man who fought without weapons. The man from the love letters must have been in tatters. But he had brought this on himself, so

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Maomao did not feel any special compassion and just prepared the painkiller indifferently.

Once the love letter man's treatment was over, Ujun left, gently lending him a shoulder to lean on.

Maomao waved to him as she left with her gentle air and returned to the infirmary, where Court Physician Li sighed.

“That’s problematic,” he said.

“What’s problematic?” Maomao asked.

Doctor Li scratched his head in concern.

“You know there have been a lot of skirmishes between the military lately, right? Well, the higher-ups have ordered us to interrogate both the injured and those responsible for the injuries.

“We just heard one of your versions. Isn’t that enough?” Maomao replied.

If Lishu was the reason for the dispute, then the reason for Basen's intervention was quite clear.

"I think I understand Mr. Basen very well. I don't think he could have ignored someone insulting a lady, especially a former high-ranking consort," Maomao said matter-of-factly.

Although in reality, he knew that Basen had a particular fondness for Lishu, to the point that he had made a marriage proposal to the U clan through her elder sister. But there was no need to tell these details to Court Physician Li, who was unfamiliar with this story.

"Still, I have to make a report. But Mr. Basen? I don't think it's a good idea to ask him to come here..."

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"..."

Maomao pondered for a moment. To her, Basen wasn't that intimidating. He liked beautiful things, was an obedient son who respected Gaoshun, and was incapable of contradicting his mother, sister, or sister-in-law. He was a bear in a man's clothing, impulsive and direct, but he would never attack without provocation. (Why is Court Doctor Li so nervous?) Then he understood. From a general perspective, Basen was an elite warrior who served directly under the emperor's brother.

"Should I be the one to talk to him directly?" Doctor Li asked uncertainly.

(Come to think of it, Doctor Li didn't have much contact with Mr.

Swimming pool)

In the western capital, court physician Li worked at the city clinic. Basen had been there once before, but as Jinshi's replacement on a courtesy visit. Despite being a mere substitute on that occasion, the fact that he had fulfilled a duty for the imperial family may have made him feel the need to maintain a certain distance.

(Perhaps Jinshi was acting more distant than usual at that time.)

"I don't think he's someone who cares much about formality. If you tell him it's part of your job, he's not going to rip your arms off."

"If he was the kind of person to do that, he would have taken it out on Tianyu."

"I could really rip his head off."

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The court physician Li sometimes said funny things, he thought, though his eyes reflected no joy.

“Generally, only high-ranking officials or members of noble families can speak with dignity to a prestigious clan.”

"But you approached those two men without any problems."

Although they had not yet formally received their clan characters, they were still members of the U and Shin families.

“They may be from noble families, but when it comes to medicine, I am above them. Court physician Liu has always said that we should not allow ourselves to be trampled upon by patients within the ward.” Maomao nodded in agreement. It would be troublesome for a nosy amateur to interfere with a patient’s proper treatment.

“In any case, that patient’s attitude was deplorable. I heard that the U clan has been declining ever since Miss Lishu left the inner palace. But still, behaving like this towards Mr. Basen himself…” Doctor Li said with a sigh. He picked up the instruments. Despite his muscular build, he was a serious and thoughtful man. Although with different methods, he was just as diligent as Gaoshun. Court Doctor Li sighed as he put away the instruments. He was a muscular but serious man, and like Gaoshun, he was meticulous in his ways.

"Excuse me, Court Doctor Li, are you married?" Maomao asked suddenly, but she needed to know.

It may have been too direct a question, but curiosity got the better of Mohammed.

“No, but I have a bride that my parents chose for me,” Dr. Li replied.

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“I understand,” said Maomao.

(What a pity) He thought that Hongniang, Empress Gyokuyou's chief servant, would be a good match even though she was older than him, but there seemed to be no chance.

“So, besides the physical risk, there are other problems in facing Mr. Basen?” Maomao asked, returning to the previous topic.

"Yes. The Ma clan serves as the imperial family's personal guard. That's why they have no position and are always by their lord's side. But some ignorant idiots mistake lack of position for incompetence and provoke them," Ma clan physician Li explained.

“In this case, not only the ribs are in danger, but also the neck,” Maomao said.

As he put away the remaining bandages, he noticed that Doctor Li was unusually talkative that day.

“Court Doctor Li…”

Maomao watched as court doctor Li carefully placed the report documents. It looked like he was trying to push the paper towards Maomao. Although he tried to make it look natural, he wasn't very good at this kind of trick.

“You don’t like the idea of interviewing Mr. Basen to write the report?”

“N-no, that’s not it...” Doctor Li replied, visibly nervous. His gaze was evasive.

“If it’s about work, I’ll go, but...”

He doesn't seem very enthusiastic. Maomao bangs on the table.

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“If it’s Court Physician Li’s order, I can go in your place.”

“Really? You would?” asked court physician Li in a voice that conveyed a clear “I hope so!” Anyone else would be more effusive in their gratitude, but he was Li’s court physician. Besides, Maomao owed him some favors, so he didn’t mind doing this for him.

"As I command" Sometimes, Maomao could also be reasonable and accept orders.

Chapter 14: Two People in Harmony

Basen's job was to be Jinshi's bodyguard. Originally, he was supposed to be in Jinshi's office, but today was different.

(If I remember correctly, some days I dedicated the day to training)

The fact that he injured his opponent in the morning made today one of those days.

(Unless they call you right away)

When Maomao arrived at the training ground, she found a bunch of sweaty men. It seemed like it was time to rest, wiping away the sweat with towels and drinking water from bamboo tubes.
Some were shirtless and others were wearing only underwear.
It wasn't a particularly strange scene to her, so she passed by without paying much attention.

When he told court physician Li that he was going to the training camp, Li made a face as if to ask:

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“Do you want me to accompany you?” But Maomao rejected him. Leaving the infirmary unguarded was not a good idea, and besides, it was unlikely that the guards would try anything with her. Although she did not want to be associated with the eccentric strategist, she had to admit that such a connection conferred certain benefits on her. Therefore, most of the tough guards tended to treat her quite politely. Only someone truly ignorant would dare to mess with her.

(It's certainly a sneaky thing)

However, Maomao was small and physically weak. If he could take advantage of something to survive, he would do so. The soldiers looked at her sideways, initially surprised, and then showed expressions of disappointment or of someone touching something unpleasant.

(After all, it is under the jurisdiction of the eccentric strategist) The truth is that the task of court physician Li suited Maomao perfectly. There was a good chance that the eccentric strategist would show up at the infirmary in the afternoon to kill time. And I'd rather be in a stinky place than have to talk to that old man.

While everyone was resting, some continued to have intense confrontations. A burly soldier and a very small one. They were Lihaku and Basen.

They both wielded a wooden sword and a small shield. Judging by their sweat-covered faces, they must have been fighting for some time. Despite the heat, they wore leather armor to prevent injuries.

(It's obvious that Basen has the advantage) Even Maomao, who had no knowledge of martial arts, knew this. The size difference was abysmal. Lihaku must have been almost two meters tall, while Basen was about one meter seventy. However...

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(Will they be tied?)

Basen managed to skillfully dodge Lihaku's attacks. He used his small shield to deflect the blade and dodge, and just as Lihaku raised his sword, Basen launched a counterattack.

Lihaku wasn't far behind and blocked the attacks with his shield.

(I thought Lihaku was strong…)

The man who looked like a bear in human skin was facing another who actually looked like a bear. Basen must have been quite strong. Maomao couldn’t follow all of their movements in detail, but he could tell that the two of them used not only their hands but also their feet to maintain distance, and used their center of gravity to perform feints and maneuvers. Although Lihaku’s appearance gave the impression of pure brute strength, he had a good sense of strategy. It didn’t just depend on his physical build, but he had also developed skills over time.

However, it was amazing how Basen managed to make up for a difference in construction that would normally be a crushing disadvantage.

(The normal thing would be for the short one to be the smart one...)

In this case, Lihaku was the skilled one and Basen was the brute force one. It's not that Basen's technique was lacking, of course, but he gave the impression that he made up for his size difference with sheer muscle. He had to have been born with a special muscle structure to pull this off.

(They should drink water... and some salt too) Maomao went to a nearby shade and sat down. The nearby police officers watched her from a distance.

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"Is there anything we can help you with?" asked an officer who had probably seen Maomao a few times.
Although he couldn't remember her name, his polite tone revealed that he treated her with consideration.

“There is no need,” replied Mohammed.

"As requested."

Maomao took a sip of the tea she had brought, anticipating that it would take a while. She also took out some rice sandwiches, one of her favorite snacks, from her lap.

(At this rate, these two are going to get heatstroke.) It would be a good idea to bring something to drink and something salty to eat. He had a drink, but saved some snacks to offer later.

She was about to resume observing the fight when someone approached her.

“What is a lady of the court doing in a place like this?” asked a young officer. Those around him seemed
nervous.

(It seems like we have an ignorant person here) Maomao slowly looked up. It was a group of three officers. They looked at her curiously.

“It’s not a place a woman should come so easily. Unless, with that appearance, you’re here to hunt men, right?” The officer at the center said this and the other two laughed.

Judging by the nervousness of the officers around him, the young man must have been of high rank.

(I think I've seen this before...) But I couldn't remember. Maybe he was in the infirmary or maybe they knew each other somewhere.

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meeting of the nobility. In any case, they didn't know each other, so for Maomao it was as if it was the first time she had seen him.

Maomao stood up, dusted off her skirt and said:

“My apologies, I came to carry out an errand for the court physician. If I’m disturbing you, I’ll go somewhere else.” When Maomao tried to leave, the young officer grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Espere."

"What do you want?" Maomao tensed, prepared for any provocation. At that exact moment... A wooden sword was thrown into the air, spinning on itself, and fell to the ground in a parabola.

“Ah, I give up, I give up!” Lihaku exclaimed, throwing up his hands. He wiped the sweat from his face and let out a heavy sigh. Let's call it a day, Basen.

“...”

Basen looked dissatisfied.

"Oh, that's the girl! Hey!" Apparently, Lihaku noticed Maomao's presence and waved to her.

(Did he really give up? Or did he do it because he saw me? Or maybe to save face for Basen?) Whatever the reason, it didn't matter.

Lihaku and Basen approached her, drenched in sweat.

“Hello, girl. What brings you here? As you can see, your father, the Great General Khan, is not around.”

“G-Great General Khan?!” The eccentric strategist’s name left the young officer surprised.

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Maomao, despite the discomfort he felt, forced a smile.
Lihaku normally referred to the strategist as “that old man,” so he must have used the formal title on purpose, to make it clear to the young officer who he was dealing with.

"Hear? It sounded like he was talking to you. Is it over yet?" Basen interjected.

He was removing his armor with the leather breastplate still on, slowly untying the tangled straps. Despite the distance, the smell was unbearable.

“No, it was nothing important,” replied the young man, leaving in a hurry with his companions. They disappeared from there like the devil.

“Hmm, these types have become common lately and they are troublesome,” Basen said as sweat ran down his face.

“So, girl, what are you doing in such a nasty place like this?” Lihaku looked worried. He seemed to be telling her, “I won’t always be able to protect you.”

“I came to ask Master Basen a few questions about what happened this morning.”

"Questions? Did you do something, friend?

“You didn’t know?” Maomao thought it would be too tedious to have to explain this to Lihaku.

“I’ve been working on paperwork all day. When you get promoted, it’s something you can’t avoid,” Lihaku added.

Maomao nodded in understanding. Apparently, he had received another promotion after returning from the Western Capital with the Crown Prince.

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“It’s nothing special,” Basen said.

“A military police officer who had a confrontation with you was taken to the infirmary. He had severe bruises and a broken rib. From the infirmary, we have now verified the circumstances of the injuries with both the patient and the person who caused them. So, I would appreciate your cooperation,” Maomao explains in one go, wanting to quickly end the tedious explanation.

“What a bummer…”

Lihaku, while wiping his sweat, made a resigned face. When Maomao offered him some senbei, he began to eat them with gusto.

"It's nothing at all. I just gave a lesson to an officer who got his rank thanks to his lineage but lacks ability. Just like the previous ones, there are many foxes who hide behind the tiger, who have no real ability, but seem to attack others on any pretext. I get sick because they think they are strong just by going in a group."

It seemed that Basen was disgusted by the idea of factional fighting.

(Certainly the young people seemed very vain.) If you have the freedom to do whatever you want with any excuse, it is easy to get out of control.

"Training with you must be tough. Even I'm out of breath.
I don't think it's a good idea to suddenly start training those daddy's little boys who don't know how tough the world is," Lihaku commented.

"I was considerate. I took matters into my own hands, as always," Basen defended himself.

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“A bear’s consideration is instant death to a human!”

"Oh yes?" (These two get along surprisingly well) Maomao didn't know if it was because they were both athletic types or because Lihaku had a special talent for winning people over.

Although the moment of cordiality was interrupted, Maomao continued with his work.

“I heard the fight started because you insulted Miss Lishu.”

“?” Basen became visibly agitated and looked away.

“My, my…” Lihaku looked at Basen with a smile.

"Is that true, sir?"

"Y-yes, that's right! Is there a problem with that? Miss Lishu is a direct descendant of the U clan. Furthermore, even though she is no longer one, she was a high-ranking consort. Why should she be called 'a prostitute'? Expelled from the U clan? 'palace for infidelity'?"

"Did they tell you that?"

It seemed that the content of the conversation between the man in the love letter and Ujun had been considerably softened.

“Miss Lishu’s sin is not hers! She was just manipulated by those around her, why does she have to be slandered like this?!”
Basen kicked the ground hard.

“And in the end the discussion ended in a fight, right?”

"Yes. If I have any flaw, it's that I didn't put iron armor on my opponent, but leather."

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"And with leather armor, he fractured his ribs..."

He is definitely a monster, Maomao thought with deep conviction.

While listening, Maomao went with the two of them to a pavilion. I needed a table to take notes.

“What infuriates me the most is that man called Ujun. Being Miss Lishu’s relative, he would laugh and let it go!

Even sitting on the stone chair, Basen's irritation did not calm down.

"Come on, come on. Eat this." Lihaku threw a snack into Basen's mouth. For a moment, Basen made an indescribable expression, but instead of spitting it out, he began chewing.

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(They definitely get along well) Although it had nothing to do with Lihaku, he decided to accompany her. Honestly, it was a relief that Basen wasn't alone, as he could be difficult to deal with.

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"In this situation, UJun shouldn't be able to say anything. If he behaves inappropriately, those testosterone-filled guys will destroy him. To survive, even if you're weak, you have to learn to lick boots or whatever it takes."

“Are you defending that coward?” Basen looked at Lihaku.
Although it seemed like he was looking at him with disdain, his expression was more like a pout, indicating that he was not actually angry.

Mr. Lihaku, do you know Mr. Ujun?” Maomao asks. “He’s a subordinate, after all. Although he was originally a civil servant, he was transferred here. For family reasons.”

"No wonder he looked so weak."

It didn't look like a noodle, but you could see that a brush would look better on it than a sword.

"That's right. When you put someone like that among the military officers, he won't do well. He might even go so far as to commit suicide because of the pressure. That's why I put him under my command. It's a nuisance, though."

Lihaku was someone who cared for others. At the very least, he would ensure the protection of his subordinates.

“Although U Jun has ‘U’ in his name, he is not recognized as part of the U clan’s main family. His father, who was a son-in-law, committed many wrongs in the main house and, instead, mistreated the family’s daughters, leading one of them to ruin. There is no way for the concubine’s son to become the successor.”

“You know a lot about this.”

The head of the U clan only referred to UJun as "Jun".

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“I should know my subordinates at least on the basics. It seems that Ujun’s father, a certain Uryuu, took advantage of his father-in-law’s weakness and acted as he pleased. Although Ujun is innocent, he is still the object of envy.”

Unlike Maomao, Lihaku is very competent. He is skilled and not stupid. He would be perfect if it weren't for the fact that he is obsessed with courtesans. I hope you won't stop visiting brothels because of Miss Pairin.

“It is said that Miss Lishu’s grandfather from the U clan adopted a child from his relatives and is raising her. Despite his advanced age, he must have felt that he could not leave the family in the hands of his daughter and son-in-law.”

"I see."

Maomao nodded, impressed by Lihaku's knowledge.

“Do you know anything about this?”

“I saw that at the recent big names meeting. “He’s a kid under ten, right?”

“Yes, exactly. Given his age as an adoptee, I don’t think they’ll make him Miss Lishu’s son-in-law.”

(It cannot be said that it is completely impossible)

There was the precedent of the Ma clan, where Gaoshun and his wife Taomei had an age difference of six years, with the wife being the older one. However, the head of the U clan mentioned that he had no intention of doing so. Basen’s expression changed from red to blue and then returned to its original color.

“However, as the U clan, it seems that they want to make up for their granddaughter’s suffering and do everything possible to make her happy. “They are said to be

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talking to find a good match for him."

(I know that too)

Lihaku licked her fingers, which had salt on them from the cookies. Maomao thought she should have brought more.

“Do you know anything about this?” Lihaku asked Basen.

“I- I don’t know anything about that.”

"Realmente?"

Basen had difficulty lying. When Lihaku pressed him, he began to fidget and make uncomfortable noises.

(It seems like there is still a long way to go)

As he listened to the conversation, Maomao moved his hands. He was writing the report taking Basen’s opinions into account, but using more subtle words.

“It still surprised me. I thought Master Lihaku didn’t like weak men.”

“I don’t know much about the U clan, but there are aspects that we should empathize with.”

“What are you saying?!” Basen looked clearly outraged.

“He’s a guy who looked down on his legitimate blood sister, pushed her to the point where she became a nun, and still listens to derogatory words against her without flinching! I should have taught him a lesson!”

"Well, well. UJun is one of those who prefers to keep things ambiguous, but he's not the type to act on his own."

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“Isn’t this the most despicable thing of all?” Maomao couldn’t help but comment. By being ambiguous, you allow others to misunderstand. As a result, if someone feels motivated and causes a problem, UJun will not be at fault in the situation.

“It’s just a matter of not getting your hands dirty, right?”

"Hmm. You're right."

Although Lihaku is in a position to protect Ujun, he seems to have his own opinions on the matter.

"Just make sure he doesn't become a person everyone likes."

"Yes, although you could say it's part of social survival."

Maomao thought that UJun's ability to survive was complicated.

“Then, to survive, okay?” Basen still had a dissatisfied expression.

“Ninety-nine percent of people are not stronger than Master Basen. No matter what weapons are given to Miss Lishu, I’m not sure if she could defeat even a stray dog, right? If I’m weak, should I fight and die?”

“Ugh… But he’s a man.”

“If we talk about Ujun’s ingredients, they are even more similar to Miss Lishu than to Miss Taomei, who is a woman. “Half of the ingredients are the same.”

“Don’t call them ingredients!” Lihaku was puzzled.

“Well, although UJun looks weak, he is surprisingly cunning. He knows how to avoid making enemies.”

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"Realmente?"

“The weak have their own ways of surviving.”

"Avoid making enemies, you say?"

At Basen's question, Lihaku formed a triangle with his fingers.

"Half right, half wrong. It's about making the opponent believe that he can't become your enemy, right? It's something you usually
to do."

"I don't do that."

"Oh, of course!"

Lihaku patted Maomao on the back. Surprised, she quickly took the brush off the paper, fearing that the letters she was writing would be distorted.

“Like you, perhaps? You should be careful around people like that.”
Basen said this with excessive seriousness.

(What do you mean by that?)

Maomao, feeling frustrated, continued to write her report.
Maybe it was a mistake when he tried to multitask because he realized he had made a mistake in his handwriting.

Chapter 15: Contradictions and Purposes

Maomao's labor problems were not limited to the constant arrival of injured workers.

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"I don't want to go back to work."

"No, you can't, Master Lakan! We're back now!"

The eccentric strategist, attached to the column like a cicada, was dragged away by his assistant, Onsou.

(Cheer up, Onsou!) Maomao provided mental support to Onsou as she continued to prepare ointments.

“Deal with the predator intelligently and, if possible, control this chaos a little.”

(What the hell does that mean?)

Remembering the old doctor's absurd request, Maomao felt overwhelmed. However, he also had to work. Ignoring the cicada-like man, he continued making the ointment.

The injuries in the ward continued to be numerous.

There were four to five serious cases a day, and one or two of them could not be attributed to training injuries. Usually, when I tried to ask about the details of the injuries, the injured would hesitate, making it obvious.

He thought that once the predator returned, things would go back to normal, but this predator was just playing around, like a cicada. However, when the strategist was present, everyone avoided approaching him and went to another ward, which made the job a little easier.

(Well, what I need now is...)

He had to ensure that supplies of wound medicine and compresses did not run out as they were used frequently.

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However, as he also needed to help the doctor with treatments, he was unable to prepare a sufficient quantity in advance.

As soon as the old man attached to the pillar disappeared, Court Physician Li returned drenched in sweat. Beside him was a young officer who seemed to have a bad skin color.

"Aren't you off today?"

“I'm off work, so I've been training at the boot camp.”

He expressed no doubts about what he was doing there, since it was not official.

"And that young man next to you?"

"He was in the training camp, so I brought him with me. He was the one who was injured by a broken wooden sword in the abdomen. I told him to come check on him every day, but he didn't show up.

“That’s right,” Maomao recognized the young officer.

Maomao and Court Doctor Li looked at the young officer.

"Since my wound has already been stitched, I'm fine. Don't worry. It will heal soon."

“Really?” Despite this, the young man still looked unwell.

“Let’s take a look.”

Court physician Li held the young official in a hug from behind. Maomao untied the young man's obi and checked the bandage on his abdomen.

"It smells horrible!"

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"What did you say?"

“It looks like he not only needs his bandage changed, but he also hasn’t even showered!”

“That’s why young people are like that! They have an excessive metabolism and strong body odor! You should at least clean yourself with water!”

"What the hell is going on?! You've arrested me and are stripping me naked!" The young officer squirmed, but Court Physician Li, who was unnecessarily muscular, was stronger.

“Maomao, go find another doctor. Let’s change this bandage quickly.”

"Understood!" Maomao went to look for the doctor in the next room.

The bandage was tightened to stop the bleeding, but when it was removed the smell intensified.

"There is some pus. Have you been exercising vigorously? The suture broke."

"Did you take your antibiotics correctly?"

"I wish you would stop doing that. If the wound doesn't heal, they'll blame us."

The doctor who had been called to help complained. He was a doctor in his thirties with a scraggly beard.

Unlike the doctors in the inner palace, the ones in the inner palace were mostly competent. Furthermore, in the infirmary near the training ground, they treated a large number of patients every day, so they worked with a focus on efficiency.

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Although they were busy, it was pleasant to watch their waste-free way of working.

“The infected part was removed and the wound disinfected. “Here is the needle.”

Maomao prepared the tools while the two doctors began to stitch up the wound. The young officer had a piece of bandage in his mouth. He had bruises all over his body, and it was unclear whether they were from training or something else.

The second suture was only in one place, so it was over quickly.

"I also hope you take your meds. That's what they're for."

“By the way, give us back the briefs and boxers we lent you the other day.”

It seems that the young officer was hurt by these words, as he immediately turned red. Apparently, he remembered having done something embarrassing for his age.

"Now, even though we've just finished stitching you up, could you tell me who did this to you? Last time, you suddenly disappeared and made us worry." Court physician Li approached the official.

“It was an accident during training. “It doesn’t matter who did it.”

“No, no, it’s obvious that there was malicious intent behind this! You had a broken wooden sword stuck in your abdomen.” The court physician with a scraggly beard nodded.

“Judging by your accent, you must be from Isei Prefecture.”

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"...."

The young officer remained silent.

For court physician Li, who had been in the western city for about a year, it was easy to identify the origin from the accent.

“So the opponent must be an official from the capital.” The shaggy-bearded doctor confirmed this as he stroked his chin.

“Come on, if it’s a faction fight, please do it somewhere else. I’m angry that they’re defeated so easily. And don’t forget to inform your superiors.”

“The problem is, even if I report it, they will ignore me.” The young officer spat out these words.

"Weak officers are weak because they want to be. They just need to get stronger."

Maomao understands what he is saying, but from her perspective, if this means things are going to get worse, she would like the problem to be properly addressed. It was not just a problem for the officers; it also increased the workload of the doctors.

The young officer seemed surprisingly stubborn, so she had to at least make sure he changed his bandage and took his medicine properly. Although it wasn't complicated, it would be troublesome if his condition worsened.

(Speaking of complications…) Maomao remembered Jinshi. If this man had been so diligent as to insist on having the bandage changed, he would have already been cured. He had not received any news about the jade plate. She figured that if there was anything, they would contact her. Thinking of this, she prepared the anti-infective medicine for the young officer.

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...

Although Maomao didn’t like the rumors, she wasn’t a fan of them either. Still, I had no intention of hearing the same story over and over again.

"Well, there's no need to tell you, I already know."

However, there was someone who politely began to explain.

“You see, until now, the army had been dominated by the Empress Dowager’s faction, but in recent years, thanks to the appearance of Consort Gyokuyou, the men of Isei Province have begun to make themselves known.”

While Maomao was wrapping the bandage, Chue talked non-stop.
Ever since she was transferred to the infirmary near the training ground, Chue started frequenting there. Doctors delegated Chue's care to Maomao, perhaps to avoid seeing a married woman's skin, which meant the two were able to treat each other alone and talk more easily.

"However, the Empress Dowager's faction will not sit idly by. As long as Lord Lakan is in charge, the neutral faction acts as a moderator, preventing any major problems from arising. However, during his absence, this balance has been disturbed!"

“Ah, I see.”

Maomao moved and touched Chue's right arm, whose fingers were barely moving and trembling.

“So, it seems that Lord Lakan’s faction is also having trouble. From what I heard, some people in his faction have switched sides to the Empress Dowager or the Empress Faction.”

“About that…” Maomao continued massaging Chue’s arm.

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“It’s something that intrigues me. About the characteristics of the Empress Dowager and the Empress.”

“Since Miss Maomao knows both of them, it’s understandable that you’re interested.”

"Yes. Both of them don't seem to have aggressive personalities, do they? It's strange to think that Empress Gyokuyou and the Empress Dowager are facing off against each other." The Dowager Empress was the kind of person who freed slaves and set up clinics within the palace for homeless women. Empress Gyokuyou was also not one to remain silent if attacked, but she was not warlike by nature either.

“It is inevitable that the family of origin will get involved. The Empress Dowager’s family is quite greedy. From the way the young Empress Dowager was introduced into the palace, this part can be intuited.”

"How scary."

As Maomao pressed the acupuncture points on Chue’s hand, she pondered whether the acupuncture was having an effect. Beside him, he was noting how much Chue’s arm movement had improved compared to last time.

“So, Empress Gyokuyou’s side is Lord Gyoku’en’s faction?”

"Well, more or less. People from the provinces have gathered. Since it's difficult to advance without connections in the capital, Mr. Gyoku'en, who comes from the provinces and believes in meritocracy, is seen as a promising star."

"But isn't Mr. Gyoku'en elderly and also having problems with the succession?"

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Maomao recalled hearing that when his eldest son, Gyoku'ou, died, he did not return to the western capital due to his old age and difficulties in establishing a power base.

“That’s right, and that’s why they’re attacking the Empress’s faction.”

“Are they attacking the empress’s faction?” Maomao tilted her head in confusion.

“So the new empress faction isn’t attacking the empress dowager faction?” Maomao remembered the words of the U clan chief, who mentioned that they were despised by the new faction.

"Well, it's not that simple. Prominent members of the Empress's side are also being attacked. It can't be said that it's that simple. Above all, what do you think of Wang Fang, who was assassinated in Mr. Lakan's office?"

“It seems like there are a lot of things hidden behind this.”

“Yes, the three court ladies who killed Wang Fang were all from families related to the Shin clan.” (Lahan said something similar), Maomao thought. Although he had yet to hear the story from Lahan, it seemed like he might hear it from Chue.

“So, Wang Fang was on the Empress Dowager’s side and was murdered by the Empress Dowager’s side, making it look like a crime of passion?”

"That's a possibility, but it could also have been a common murder."

“What was Wang Fang investigating?”

"Hmm, what should I do? Well, I guess I can tell you this as something special." Chue leaned closer to whisper in Chue's ear.

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Maomao.

“It seems that Wang Fang was investigating a treasure from the Shin clan’s family that disappeared a long time ago.”

Maomao tried hard not to show surprise.

“Apparently, among the relatives of the three court ladies there was someone close to the previous head of the Shin clan. It seems that Wang Fang was inquiring about the specific form of the family treasure.”

“Family treasure…”

Maomao thought this might be related to Joka's jade plate.

(Was he looking for a member of the imperial family who did not appear in the family tree?)

Maomao wondered for what purpose.

(Did they want to invent a new member of the imperial family?)

No, if Wang Fang was on the Empress's side, there would be no need to invent a member of the imperial family. Something didn't add up.

Thinking that his doubts had increased, Maomao let go of Chue's hand.

“Ouch, oh, my old wound hurts,” Chue complained, seeming to want a little more massage. He rubbed his hand exaggeratedly.

“I have other work to do, so that’s all for today,” Maomao said.

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"So bad," Chue complained.

When Maomao left the room, a lady from the high court was holding a basket. (Let's see, if I remember correctly...)

It was the new apprentice with the short name. She was wearing a lot of clothes, perhaps to avoid exposing her skin.

“I came to deliver the medicinal herbs that were ordered from me,” he said.

"Oh sim."

The basket contained medicinal herbs. Just like Changsha, rookies are often sent to perform tasks in various departments.

"Um, wait a moment, please."

Muhammad compared the herbs to his wish list.

"Rhubarb, Cnidium officinale, cinnamon bark..."

They were ingredients for making bruise remedies.

"It's all there. No problem."

Maomao took the basket and tried to put it away on the medicine shelf. However, the apprentice did not leave.

“Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao, it seems like he wants to tell you something,” Chue said, nudging Maomao. Chue hadn’t left yet either.

"Do you need anything else?"

“I heard from Yao and the others that you guys had a pharmacy in town, is that true?”

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The apprentice looked seriously at Maomao.

"Yes, that's how it is."

“So you don’t know anyone in the same profession? A man who started out as a pharmacist or doctor near the capital in recent years.”

"A man who opened a pharmacy? Well, yes, I know one."

Muhammad had an apprentice.

"S-seriously?"

“Yes, a man named Sazen. He runs a pharmacy in the red-light district.” “Sazen… red-light district… Could it be a fake name? Does he look like someone with a shady past?!” the apprentice exclaimed.

"..."

Maomao closed his mouth. Something didn’t seem right. Maybe it was a mistake to speak carelessly.

(Come to think of it, that guy ran away during the Shi clan rebellion)

If it were discovered that he had participated in the rebellion, it would be very troublesome. He was not a bad person, and especially after so much training, finding a new pharmacist would be a hassle.

More importantly, why was he looking for a man who worked as a pharmacist?

"Please! Let me meet this guy, Sazen!" The apprentice grabbed the collar of Maomao's clothes and began shaking it.

"Well, but..."

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“If you don’t introduce me, I’ll look for it myself! It’s a pharmacy in the red light district, right?!”

(I said more than I should have) Since there are few pharmacists in the red light district, you'll certainly find Sazen quickly.

“Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao, why don’t you guide her calmly?”

"Miss Chue, Miss Chue, this is none of your business."

"Hehehe. Maybe Chue will accompany them too. After all, I was fired from my previous job and now I have a lot of free time." Chue laughed, amused.

Maomao, still with the collar of his clothes grabbed by the new apprentice, growled, wondering what to do.

Chapter 16: Me

The tall new maid was persistent. Overwhelmed, Maomao finally agreed to meet her on his day off. Since they were from different departments and the new maid’s presence or absence didn’t change the staffing, it was easier to coordinate a day off with her than with Yao and the others.

“My name is Yo. Nice to meet you.” She introduced herself to Chue, who insisted on accompanying them. Maomao, who didn’t remember her name, was relieved.

Compared to Changsha, the other new maid, I was quiet. Maomao was also usually quite reserved, so

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silence took over naturally.

(Maybe it would be better to meet her in the red light district)

Having met in the chambers, they now walked in absolute silence. Although the distance between the chambers and the red-light district was considerable, Maomao, in her frugality, considered it a waste to use a carriage. She could not help but be thrifty.

(But I couldn't leave a young girl waiting alone there either)

It would have been ideal for Chue to accompany them, but they were heading to the Verdigris House. Unlike Maomao, who was born and raised in the red-light district, a demure young woman like Chue might be attacked if she ventured there alone. I would have to endure the discomfort.

Leaving the main street behind and passing a willow-lined canal where small stalls beckoned, they noticed a change in the crowd.

Maomao and Yo passed through a large, ornately decorated door. On both sides of the door were guards who looked at them with questioning eyes. One of the guards was an acquaintance of Maomao, and when she raised her hand in greeting, he responded with an “ah” and nodded.

“What’s wrong, Maomao? Are you trying to pass yourself off as an intermediary courtesan?” The guard examined Yo with calculating eyes.

“I'm not trafficking people or anything like that.”

Yo shuddered as he heard the conversation between Maomao and the guard. Maomao looked at her out of the corner of his eye, as if to

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assured that he had no intention of selling it. However, for an inexperienced woman to walk through the door of the red light district without any knowledge could only be interpreted as a sales transaction. A particular aroma and lazy sighs mingled in the air. Courtesans were bidding farewell to clients returning home in the early hours of the morning, servants were collecting lanterns, and the chirping of small exotic birds could be heard from the second-floor windows.

Maomao walked with firm steps down the main street of the pleasure district, followed timidly by Yo.

"Don't look to the sides, walk with your eyes forward. And if someone tries to touch you, scream at the top of your lungs."

"U-understood."

After walking a little, they arrived at Casa Verdigris.

"Wow, Maomao! Long time no see."

The deep voice of Ukyou, the head servant, greeted them familiarly. He was one of the oldest servants in House Verdigris, known for his good nature and for taking care of Sazen and Zulin.

“This young lady is coming from your side? It won’t be another troublesome case, will it?”

"No, I didn't bring it to sell."

I shivered again.

Why did they assume that Muhammad had brought a young girl to sell? And speaking of “annoyances,” he was referring to Zulin’s sister. The last time he saw her, she caused quite a stir. He wondered if the beating the old madam had given her had made her see reason.

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"What happened to that problem?"

"For now, she's behaving herself. I don't think there's any brothel other than House Verdigris that would tolerate two sisters together."

Apparently, Zulin's sister wasn't as stupid as she seemed. Old Madame was strict, but Casa Verdigris was one of the few brothels that offered such good conditions.

I watched Maomao with discomfort. Even so, Maomao mustered up the courage to ask Ukyou one last question.

"Did they find the thief?" He was referring to the individual who sneaked into the room of Joka, Zulin's sister's client.

"Yes, we found him. He was a street performer. A nobody who barely made enough to survive from his performances. There was no way he could pay for Casa Verdigris's services."

"And why would I do something like that?"

"He said someone offered him money. He was supposed to sneak into Verdigris House and steal something."

A bad feeling came over Mohammed.

"And who gave you the job?"

"We don't know that. The acrobat was just a pawn, someone to be used and discarded." Ukyou shrugged helplessly.

(This is already out of my control)

There was nothing else to do. Maomao decided to get straight to the point.

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“So, Sazen is here? “I came to see you today.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. He usually walks around the orchard at this time, why don’t you go see?”

"OK."

My face was still full of apprehension. The two of them walked into the garden, with me slowly following Maomao.

"T-that... while I understand that he's close to you, don't you think I should be more respectful when talking to him?"

Admittedly, her tone was quite casual. However, she had been speaking to them this way for so long that trying to be polite now would only lead to ridicule or, worse yet, being seen as uptight and insufferable.

"Well, let's just say I'm used to talking like that. Court formalities are just part of my job."

"Just part of your job?"

Precisely because formalities were limited to the workplace, he strove to maintain respectful treatment of everyone, regardless of their age or social status. It was simpler that way.

"There it is"

Maomao went to the back of Casa Verdigris. In the field near the ruined house where he lived, there was a man of average height.

“No, Sazen!”

Maomao nodded to him. Sazen slowly stood up. I was harvesting garlic. An essential ingredient in the red-light district, as

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It was attributed restorative and aphrodisiac properties, in addition to its culinary use. The garlic that grew there was large and robust, perfect for cooking.

“What brings you here? Are you here to review the accounts?” Sazen asked.

"No, I brought a visitor for you." Maomao pushed Yo in front of him.

“For me?” Sazen watched her with narrowed eyes. It was obvious he didn’t know her. I, for my part, had a bitter expression on my face.

"...Who is this person?" Maomao looked at her with a frown.

“A suspicious guy who recently opened a pharmacy.”

"Don't you think you're looking down on me?"

"No, it's not him. I'm looking for a thin guy with a beautiful, inscrutable face who always wears half his face covered. That's the suspect!"

"Aren't you indirectly telling me that I'm not handsome?"

Maomao ignored the comment and placed a finger on her chin thoughtfully.

“…”

“Sazen, is that person there?”

"And yes."

Maomao looked at the ruined house.

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"Is something wrong? Were you looking for me, Sazen?" a sleepy voice echoed from inside, oblivious to the tension of the moment.

A man came out of the ruined house with half his face covered, yawning. He was dressed disheveledly, with his obi not tied properly. His underwear was visible.

“You don’t smell.”

He was a scruffy-looking but friendly man.

Before them was Kokuyou, an affable man with a sincere look despite the difficulties that life threw at him.

"He arrived yesterday and spent the night. You came to see him instead of me..." Sazen started to say, but Yo quickly ran towards him as soon as she saw him.

"Doutor!"

And then...

“¡¿!?”

In a sudden and violent movement, Yo struck Kokuyou with all his strength. A sharp sound echoed through the air, suggesting a blow capable of breaking bones, be it teeth or knuckles. And as if that were not enough, Yo threw himself at him and began to beat him.

"Hey, stop!"

(What is he doing?! What did he do?!)

Maomao and Sazen had to pull Yo away from Kokuyou. I was teary-eyed and sniffling.

“Oh, is that you, hey? “You’ve grown up a lot.”

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Kokuyou was smiling with blood splattering on his face. The cloth that hid half of his face had fallen off, revealing an ugly pox scar. It was typical of Kokuyou to continue smiling even after being hit, but at the same time it was disturbing.

“The fact that you are in the capital means that…”

"Yes, that's right. It happened exactly as you said." Yo's fists, soaked in the blood from Kokuyou's nose, trembled.

“The village… The village was razed.” Yo’s words fell like a stone.

Smallpox scars similar to Kokuyou's could be seen on his torn sleeves.

Determined to make sense of the situation, Maomao led them into the dilapidated house. With almost no furniture, they used upturned pots and buckets to make improvised seats.

"It's a dirty place, sorry." “Now, now, there's no need.”
Maomao responded to Sazen's apology. After all, that house had been his home.

"Isn't there somewhere a little more... cozy? We could use one of the rooms in Verdigris House," commented Chue, who had joined them at some point. Although it was the first time she had seen Sazen and Kokuyou, she integrated herself into the situation with the naturalness that characterized her.

With five people, the dilapidated house was very cramped.

Although Yo’s eyelids were swollen, her breathing had calmed down. Her hands were a little swollen from hitting Kokuyou with her fists.

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Kokuyou cut the inside of his mouth, but he didn't lose any teeth.
Even if it was a woman's fist, receiving such a blow without resistance must have hurt. Still, he maintained a carefree smile. The piece of cloth he stuffed into his nose to stop the bleeding made him look pitiful.

“Well, Kokuyou and I seem to know each other. Could you explain to me what’s going on here?” Maomao asked as he poured hot water into some chipped cups. Chue looked around for something sweet to go with the drink, but found nothing.

"Do you want me to explain?" Kokuyou spoke, as Yo was still sniffling and didn't seem in a position to speak clearly.

"Por favor."

“I told you that a shaman accused me of witchcraft and that I was expelled from the village, remember?”

Maomao remembered hearing this story. They had met about two years ago when he had helped Kokuyou, who was unable to board a ship due to smallpox scars. It was during his first visit from the Western capital.

"Well, his family and I lived in the same town."

"What does it mean that the city was destroyed?" It was something that could not be ignored.

“Because of a plague of locusts? I don’t remember exactly, but I think they accused you of that and fired you.

"Well, not exactly... I would say..."

“It was an epidemic. Smallpox,” Yo explained.

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“Smallpox...” It was a highly contagious and deadly disease.
After a severe fever, the body would become covered in rashes, and although some managed to survive, the rashes often became infected and left permanent scars.

“So the marks on your face are also a result of this epidemic?”

"No, I had smallpox before I came to town. It was terrible, you know? I almost died." Kokuyou continued speaking in his carefree tone, without a hint of tension in his voice, as was typical of him.

“Our village was in the northwest, very far from the capital. It was a pioneer village. food that came from outside"

“I see, so a pioneer village…”

Maomao understood why the village had disappeared.

“When food is scarce, these places are the first to suffer,” he said.

Many of the people who dedicated themselves to opening new lands were poor and dispossessed people.

If there was a plague of locusts... The price of food would go up... And in a pioneer village with no savings... They had no way to buy food... They went hungry... They became weak... They fell ill... If an epidemic were declared, they were the first to be abandoned. They disappeared from the face of the earth before they even appeared on the maps. Soon no one would remember them and they would be forgotten forever.

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That's why the news didn't reach the capital and nobody cared.

"I remember that shortly before I left I heard that there were smallpox patients in the neighboring villages... I thought perhaps..."

“But you had already left our village before that, hadn’t you?” Yo said softly.

"Why?! Why did you abandon us?! We had no doctor and people did nothing but die," Yo exclaimed. He was about to cry again.

“They kicked me out,” Kokuyou said in a calm voice, as if he wanted to calm her down. “The village chief never liked me, and they probably had no more food to give me. If I hadn’t left, they would have sacrificed me as an offering to the curse spirits.”

Kokuyou wasn't the one to blame. The one to blame was the village chief, who decided to fire the doctor. I certainly knew that.

But for a young woman in her mid-teens, reason was not enough to contain the emotional outburst.

"Even so! If you had stayed...!" Yo screamed, standing up, tears streaming down his face.

Kokuyou was expelled. After that, smallpox spread and the villagers began to fall one after another. There was nothing to do but watch. Unable to do anything, they could only watch helplessly. It must have been hell for me.

"If Kokuyou... If you were..." he sobbed.

Kokuyou had already contracted smallpox. It was said that anyone who had had it once was immune. If he, with his medical knowledge, had stayed, he might have been able to save some lives.

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“I’m sorry… I’m sorry,” Kokuyou apologized. But it wasn’t his fault. It was the village chief who had driven him away. If they ordered him to leave, he would have no choice but to leave. Yo’s aggression was undoubtedly unjustified. But deep down she knew it. He knew it wasn’t his fault. She was just taking out her frustration and helplessness on someone older than her.

Even though she knew it herself. She knew it was useless, but the resentment of not being able to do anything caused her to take it out on the adult Kokuyou.

(Despite everything, climbing on him and starting to hit him... How polite)
If Kokuyou wasn't the way he was, he would definitely have reacted differently.

"Why?! Why didn't you stay?!"

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

(Although he may seem carefree, he is more mature than he appears)

Kokuyou, with a smile on his swollen face, hugged the sobbing Yo's head.

“I hate to interrupt this exciting moment, but I have a question,” Chue chimed in. “You said you came to the capital with your family, Yo. If the city was razed, where are they now? Are they okay?” Chue was spot on. Maomao was also surprised by this.

I, who had already calmed down a bit after venting, took a sip of hot water and replied:

“In my case, Kokuyou treated me before the epidemic spread”

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"Did he treat you?"

Maomao, puzzled, turned her head to Kokuyou. Sazen also seemed interested, listening attentively.

It's an old method. Once you get smallpox, it's hard to get it again. So it's about getting the disease when you're healthy," Kokuyou explained.

“Do you mean the method of inoculating the weakened pus of smallpox?” Maomao asked.

He had heard about this from his father, Luomen.

“Yes, the scab of a smallpox wound is safe. Even after it turns into a scab, it can remain contagious for almost a year,” Kokuyou said.

"S-so, could I... could I do that too?"

"Hmm... I'd love to help you, but I don't have any good scabs at the moment. Plus, it's a risky method and might fail," Kokuyou said as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Fail? You mean it could get worse?"

"There's a one in fifty chance of something serious happening. Sometimes it even causes death. And it can also leave scars," Kokuyou replied.

“It would be terrible if Maomao was left with scars,” Chue said as he drank the water. Maomao, who already had several scars, was not too worried about getting a few more.

“That thing about them dying sometimes… that’s something to think about,” Sazen said, frowning.

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“It would be great if there was a safer, lower-risk method,” Kokuyou said with a blank look. “You applied such a dangerous method to such a young girl… Weren’t her parents angry?”

“My father had already contracted smallpox,” Yo replied instead of Kokuyou.

“We went to that pioneer village because we lost our family to that disease and were left with nothing. At first, I held a grudge against Kokuyou. . .

Yo pulled up his sleeve and showed the marks.

"Yo's father was a very good person. He took me in when I was about to die of hunger. Although the other villagers were afraid of me because of my appearance and looked down on me," Kokuyou said, downplaying the matter with a smile, as he usually did with his past.

"In the end, my family and I managed to survive. Almost all the other villagers died. It has been almost three years since we arrived in the capital, bringing some of the orphaned children with us," Yo concluded.

Maomao had met Kokuyou just over two years ago, which meant she had been wandering aimlessly until then.

“So you started working in the inner palace to support your family,” Sazen said.

"Yes. Since Kokuyou taught me how to read and write, I could learn more easily in the palace," Yo replied.

That was why they considered her so intelligent.

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"And you still hit your benefactor like that?" Sazen said with frightening calm.

"I-I... I know, I know, but I couldn't help it..." Yo stuttered.

"Well, well. At your age, you're very sensitive and don't know how to express your emotions well, right?" Chue spoke as if he knew everything.

“Also, I think there was a lack of communication. You should have said from the beginning that this was a man with smallpox marks on his face,” Maomao replied.

“Chue doesn’t think Miss Maomao is the best person to talk to about the lack of communication, do you?” Saying that, Chue began to search the house. He found a single steamed meat bun inside a steamer on the stove.

"But that's not enough. And on top of that it's dry...", he lamented. “Don’t eat other people’s breakfast without permission,” Sazen said angrily.

“Well, after all this, you’ve met the apothecary… or rather, the doctor you were looking for. Now, what do you intend to do?”

"Knowing that Kokuyou is okay was enough for me."

“I also feel at ease knowing that I and the others are fine,” Kokuyou said with a smile. “But it seems like you have something else you want to know besides my well-being, right?”

"Yes. I wanted to ask what we should do if there was a smallpox outbreak again. That's why I came."

"Hmm... I don't know..." Kokuyou replied.

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“You don’t know?” Maomao repeated in disbelief. She was also eager to hear what Kokuyou had to say, not just me.

“My professor was researching smallpox and other contagious diseases, but…”

“Well, my teacher was researching smallpox and other epidemics...” Kokuyou began to explain.

“But…” Maomao urged him.

"Morreu."

“I see…” Maomao became disheartened and dropped his shoulders.

“I think I have come close to discovering something important. I and another person were inoculated with smallpox under the same conditions, but while I was left like that, the other person suffered no ill effects. He was weakened..."

“Wait a minute!” Maomao interrupted, raising his hand.
"I think I heard something I shouldn't ignore."

"Something you can't ignore? Ah, yes. It turns out that this other person was my twin brother. Since we were identical, my teacher took us for his comparative experiment," Kokuyou said, downplaying the seriousness of the matter.

"That's also important, of course, but what about the weakened tension?"

"It seems that my brother was inoculated with a very weakened strain of smallpox, but there is no record of this. Since my teacher died, no one knows the recipe." "And what happened to your brother?" Sazen asked with feigned indifference.

“He died,” Kokuyou replied, smiling indifferently. “So no one knows about my master’s research. I’m sorry,”

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he added with an innocent smile, clasping his hands together in apology.

“...So there’s no way to eradicate the epidemic?” Yo asked dejectedly, lowering his head.

"It would be difficult... Unless some of Kada's writings were found, of course..." Kokuyou replied in a carefree tone.

Maomao almost spilled the hot water he was drinking.

(Are you saying that now?)

“Kada, but he’s a legendary character! There’s no way something like that exists.”

“Well, my master heard a rumor. It seems that almost a hundred years ago there was a doctor named Kada, and it is said that his descendants keep his medical techniques a secret.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Sazwn said as she drank her water, having given up on retrieving the meat bun from Chue’s clutches.

(Kada, huh...) Maomao crossed his arms and thought. Perhaps due to the exertion, his stomach growled.

"Okay, I haven't eaten yet."

“Yes, let’s eat, let’s eat,” said Chue, who had already finished the bread. Without wasting a moment, he began to search the house again for something else to put in his mouth.

Remembering the street food stalls he had seen on the way to Casa Verdigris, Maomao decided to go buy some skewers.

After finishing the skewer he bought from a street stall, Maomao came back looking sullen.

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Inside the small pharmacy of the Verdigris House were Maomao, Sazen, and Yo. What were they doing? They were reviewing inventories and records. After completing the task of reuniting Yo with Kokuyou, Maomao took Yo to the pharmacy as part of her training.

“Hey, don’t you think they’ve been charging us too much for medicinal herbs lately?” Maomao asked with narrowed eyes, scanning the price list.
“Isn’t it? It’s a rip-off! But Kokuyou refuses to sell them to me for less. And of course, I only get the marsh plants through him,” Sazen complained.

Meanwhile, Kokuyou was outside the pharmacy, playing with some children with Chue. Chou-u was also with them. Their eyes met for a moment, but he looked away.
Maomao couldn't help but feel upset.

“And this other one is also very expensive. They say that since it only grows in swamps, we have to pay a special price... This guy is a profiteer!”

There was limited space to grow herbs in the garden, and when supply lines were tight, they had no choice but to give in to inflated prices.

(Massive purchases by the palace may also be contributing to the price hike.)

The consumption of medicines increased considerably. And not only because of the excessive use of the army. The previous year, the western capital received a large quantity of food and medicines. This was certainly the reason why prices were still high.

“Hey, you should learn the prices of medicinal herbs well. You’ll have to come and buy them later,” Maomao said to Yo, showing him the account book. It wasn’t something he should show

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lightly, but he trusted that the young woman would not misuse the information.

"We usually go shopping with the other court doctors.
But dishonest traders wait until we are distracted to try to cheat us. Be careful if they say things like "I've only got this left" or "I don't know when I'll get more." "Sometimes they try to sell us low-quality products."

“Understood,” Yo replied.

“They’ve played with me several times,” Sazen said, letting out a sigh.

“It seems Sazen is not very good at business,” Maomao said.

"Hey! Don't forget I was a farmer," Sazen replied.

(A farmer...)

Maomao remembered that perhaps he could ask a favor from Lahan’s older brother, who was still working in agriculture. Perhaps you could consider growing some medicinal herbs in addition to the tubers and grains. It would be worth exploring that possibility.
(I hope you won't object saying that you need the land to grow spices for En'en)

Many of these spices were also used as traditional medicine.
Maomao made sure to get some leftovers.
After checking the accounting books, Maomao began to inspect the inventory. He also took the opportunity to examine the medicines that Sazen had prepared.

“So… What do you think?” Sazen asked, looking at Maomao’s expression.

"Not bad. Not great either. It's acceptable," Maomao replied.

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"That's it? But I did exactly as you taught me!"

“It’s not enough to just follow the instructions. You also need to think about how to make taking the medication easier.”

Sazen, pouting, took out a notebook. The preparation methods and so on were written in the notebook. Sazen was not particularly smart, but his diligence was a virtue.

(While we're at it, I'll also teach you how to prepare medicine)

“Hey, could you prepare some medicine with these ingredients?”

"I could prepare something for a fever or ointment for cuts."

“Then try it, please.”

While Yo was working on this, Maomao kept checking the inventory. Although Yo’s movement was clumsy, he made no mistakes in the process.

"Did Kokuyou teach you that?"

"Yes. He taught reading, writing and medicine preparation to the children of the village. Since it was a pioneer village, accidents were always happening."

Maomao thought Yo was a quiet person, but surprisingly, he talked a lot.

"Didn't Kokuyou treat anyone other than his family for smallpox?"

"No. My father was the only one who understood how terrible smallpox was. The other villagers didn't even want to hear about it. And the chief, who was also the village witch, saw Kokuyou as an obstacle. But

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It seems like someone secretly treated some children. These children are the ones who came to the capital with us."

(And he did this without permission?!)

Either way, this ended up saving the children's lives.

"Kokuyou is so unlucky..." said Sazen, who joined the conversation while checking the notebook.

"It's clear he didn't do anything wrong, right?"

Sazen's eyes seemed to say that he didn't understand why he had hit him. I looked down in embarrassment and continued grinding medicinal herbs with the pestle.

Maomao looked out of the pharmacy, into the lobby of Verdigris House.

(There are more unknown men around here)

They could be the guards that Jinshi had arranged. Although Joka's name was not mentioned in relation to the jade tablet, they had certainly already asked their questions.

(No problem here)

Only then did Joka arrive in the lobby.

"Sister Jo…" Maomao began to say, but Joka was talking to the old woman. She was showing him an account book.

"It seems that Miss Joka will inherit the old lady's position," said a shrill voice from above. Maomao looked up and saw Chou-u.

"So the old lady finally got tired."

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“It seems so.”

Chou-u just said that and went back to the children. Chue was juggling diabolos. Not only the apprentices, but also the people passing by stopped to applaud her. It was amazing how he did it using practically only his left hand.

At her feet were some kittens. A tricolor cat, which must have come from somewhere nearby, was watching them. They were probably her babies.

(I think it's time to retire)

Joka will take over the leadership of the courtesans. It wouldn't be something immediate, as the old woman had many tasks, but Joka would certainly gradually abandon her duties as a courtesan. That way, Pairin would be left alone as one of the Three Princesses of House Verdigris. Well, if Lihaku frees her, she will leave too.

Maomao evoked memories of his childhood.

Three beautiful courtesans with large hairpins, flowing dresses and long silk robes. Their cheeks, covered in white powder, stood out with a touch of red on their lips.

How many times would I have run after them, trying to reach the hem of their dresses as they glided down the red carpet.

Pairin, bathed in the warm light of the red paper lanterns, dancing and creating indelible images in her memory.

Meimei, with her melodious voice and agile hands, moves the game pieces and makes plays that are impossible to predict.

And Joka, with his haughty attitude, composed poems that left everyone speechless.

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(Those times will not return)

Although she hated being called old-fashioned, Maomao couldn't help but feel some sadness at the thought that an entire era would come to an end.

Chapter 17: Prohibited Hunting Area

Time passed quickly since Maomao was assigned to such a busy department. In the blink of an eye, cicada season arrived with its characteristic hustle and bustle.
In addition to his usual duties, Maomao received the same training as court physicians. When it was decided to move to the western capital, he thought he would have already finished his education, but...

"A doctor never stops learning. One must ensure that skills do not rust. The group from the western capital will now receive the same training as new doctors."

Hearing the words of court physician Liu, the chief physician, Maomao had no choice but to agree.

And the training consisted of...

"Which farm are we going to today?"

Maomao swayed in the carriage. In front of her sat the court physician Li and Tianyu. Previously, as preliminary practice for autopsies, they had dissected farm animals and game animals. Now they were ordered to do it again as a review. They had gone out several times for dissections, but

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It was rare for Court Physician Li to accompany them, unlike Tianyu.

“Today we are not going to a farm, but to a hunting camp.”

“Isn’t it closed season in this area now?”

"..."

Court Doctor Li was silent. Veda was the prohibition of hunting.

Maomao was not a hunter, so she did not know the details, but she knew that this was avoided during the animals' breeding season.

“In Huayang Province, the ban is in place from spring to summer, depending on the region. This area was supposed to be closed this year, but…”

“How do you know so much?” Court Doctor Li looked at Tianyu suspiciously, surprised by his knowledge.

"Well, this is my homeland."

Maomao jumped.

“It’s dangerous!” Just as Court Physician Li said, the carriage shook, almost causing it to fall. Maomao quickly sat back down.

"What are you doing, Niang Niang?"

"Homeland?"

"Yes, fatherland. Geez, what do I do? If my father sees me, he will surely turn me into dried meat."

(And why did court physician Liu bring us to such a place?)

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Court physician Liu, the one who guided Tianyu into the world of medicine, should know this.

“Well, I can imagine why a hunt is being held during the closed season,” Tianyu said. Court Doctor Li looked away.

“The ban is only for ordinary hunters. Rich and important people are exempt, right?”

"..."

Doctor Li seemed to be terrible at lying. His silence was a statement.

"And this time it's not just any rich guy. It's someone powerful. A big shot, so to speak," Tianyu continued.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Hahaha. The one who controls the hunting grounds in this area is my father. He never really liked working for the court, and I'm sure after I left home he stopped taking those jobs altogether."

"..."

Court Doctor Li fell silent again. Despite his carefree attitude and fondness for dissections, Tianyu was intelligent.

“The big guys want to hunt animals for food, but dissection is complicated. That’s why they sometimes hire local hunters.”

“So, we are here because we were chosen as dissectors?”

"Exactly."

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Certainly, when it came to dismembering animals, no one surpassed Tianyu.

“It must have been a difficult decision for court physician Liu, right? Doctors aren’t normally sent to do this kind of work.”

Of course, dissecting humans was a secret, but dissecting animals was also frowned upon.

“Under normal circumstances, court physician Liu would have rejected it…”

Of course, Mohammed found it strange.

“No, Court Doctor Liu didn’t choose the location. In fact, if it were him, he would have refused to involve the doctors in something so trivial.” “So they secretly called us without him knowing?”

"Ugh, I dread to think what will happen to us if he finds out..."

"Don't remind me. Sometimes you have to obey orders. Court physician Li also had a hard time.

“Wasn’t there another team available? Honestly, I feel uncomfortable with Tianyu here.”

“I also feel uncomfortable with Niang Niang here.”

"That's the problem. The doctors were specifically requested. The condition was that they be people 'not bothered by any situation'."

"I have a bad feeling about this..."

Maomao questioned whether or not she should feel honored to have been chosen.

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“The dissection will be done in a shed, in secret. And we will change clothes and wear masks.”

“How hot!”

"We'll have to be careful not to get heatstroke."

The incident she had at a summer house a few years ago came to Maomao’s mind. At that time, Jinshi had suffered heatstroke and was attacked by assassins. It was a horrific experience.

(And that's why I ended up getting involved with that frog...)

Maomao was lost in thought and expressed a doubt.

“But with so many other hunting grounds available, why choose this one?”

“See, they say there’s a zhen here...”

"¡¿Un zhen?!"

Maomao’s eyes lit up. The zhen was a legendary bird that was highly venomous. It was said that throughout history, many people had been killed with zhen poison, although its very existence was questioned.

If it wasn't just a legend, Maomao wanted to see it with his own eyes.

“You shouldn’t talk about poison in front of Niang Niang!”

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Court Physician Li regretted mentioning this.

"Will they hunt him? I hope they capture him alive. If they had warned me, I could have prepared myself to resist the poison of the

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zhen."

"Niang Niang speaks as if the existence of a legendary bird is a fact..."

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Maomao, but you will not be participating in the dissection.”

“Hey?” Maomao opened his mouth, stunned.

“B-but why? I can handle the heat, I can even take care of my bowel movements!”

Cleaning the intestines was a task that no one wanted to do, as it involved dealing with excrement. This time, Maomao was willing to do it herself.

“There’s another job for you. It’s your specialty, right? The role of poison tester.” Court physician Li said it clearly.

(Oh...)

Maomao finally realized that something strange was happening.

Arriving at the hunting grounds, Maomao parted ways with court physician Li and Tianyu.

"We've been waiting for you."

Usually the one who received them was Chue, but today there was someone different.

"Puxar."

"It's an honor that you call me by my name so informally."

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A young man not even twenty years old smiled affably. There was no need to be fooled by his gentle smile and humble attitude. Because of this guy, Maomao was forced to flee from place to place in Isei Prefecture and in the end was almost killed by bandits.

(Because no one is your friend!)

He was supposed to be Hulang, the younger brother of Shikyo, the head of the Western Capital, and the grandson of Gyoku'en. He was currently working for Jinshi, but it was more like he was exiled from the Western Capital. This man, for some reason, believed that Jinshi was more suited to lead the Western Capital than his own brother, so he tried to assassinate him. He was a dangerous individual.

"I came to look for you on the orders of the Moon Prince."

"Ah," Maomao replied reluctantly. She didn't see the need to be polite to Hulang, especially when there was no one else around.

So that was why they had chosen the doctors as dissectors: to make Maomao leave. She was the guest of honor; the other two were probably dragged along, though Tianyu's presence was a curious coincidence.

"Oh? She seems calmer than I expected. Have you been updated yet?"

"Just a rough idea."

Maomao's irritation was not just due to Hulang. There was something else.

"What if he tells me that the zhen thing is also a lie...?"

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"Miss Maomao, you look at me with more fear than my own sister. Don't worry. About the legendary poisonous bird we heard from the people who organized the hunt."

"And truth?"

"Almost, almost."

Maomao approached Hulang with a questioning expression.

“Anyway, let’s go.”

Maomao followed Hulang. He led her to a clearing where there were a series of tents. There was one large tent and three slightly smaller ones, similar to the dwellings he had seen in Isei Prefecture. Aside from the shops, there was a larger building nearby.

“Is the Moon Prince in that building?”

"No, actually they prepared rooms for us in the villa, but I refused."

"Why this?"

The shop looked elegant, of course, but the villa would be much more luxurious. "This tent has only one entrance. Not a single insect gets in. The Moon Prince also agrees that it is safer than a house full of hiding places."

“Insects... ah...”

Maomao remembered the time when Jinshi was still hiding his true identity. Even then, he suffered from the aphrodisiacs added to his food.

“Wasn’t it hard to turn down the villa?”

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"Quite a lot, yes. That's why I said that the Moon Prince, besides hunting, liked to camp. It's hard being from the capital, right? They don't even have barrack."

Maomao took a look around. In the distance, he discovered a group of people clumsily trying to set up and take down tents. Apparently, the subordinates found it uncomfortable to stay in a villa while their superiors were in tents, so they tried to imitate them.

“Which high-ranking official is inviting us this time?”

“This time it is a gathering of promising young people from influential families. Even royalty needs a break from time to time and also needs to meet future candidates for high office. so far, so to speak.”

"And it was getting hard to refuse the invitation?"

"That's right. Interpersonal relationships are crucial in politics. Furthermore, there is one specific matter that I agreed to this meeting on."

(Of course, a "problem")

Hulang raised the entrance of the tent.

“Moon Prince, I have returned.”

"You were late...? What the...?!" Jinshi exclaimed in surprise.

“The poison tester is here.”

Maomao bows politely.

Jinshi couldn’t help but be astonished. Suiren and Taomei looked at her knowingly. Basen, who was present as a guard, seemed uncomfortable being in the same place as her.

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mother. The inside of the shop, despite being closed, was surprisingly cool. There were large basins of ice blocks everywhere, and the guards were fanning the place vigorously. Ventilation was provided by a skylight.

"W-why are you here?" Jinshi asked, clearly nervous.
Basen also looked surprised, while the two assistants smiled in amusement.

“Wasn’t it by order of the Moon Prince?” Maomao looks at Suiren.

“I called her because she seemed like the ideal person for this, young Maomao.”

Maomao wasn't sure if she was the ideal person, but he felt that the atmosphere reeked of trouble.

(I used to have problems often before...)

The more Maomao accepted Jinshi, the more it seemed like he was trying to keep his distance.

Maomao always thought that Jinshi was too sincere and innocent for his own good.

“Suiren, I didn’t know anything about this.”

“My apologies. It seems I’m worrying too much.”
Suiren laughed. Despite being an old woman, she was charming.

(And to think she's Jinshi's grandmother)

Maomao wondered how much other people in the store knew about Jinshi's identity. What was certain was that Basen had no idea.

“Please sit down,” Jinshi says to Maomao, who is sitting in an empty chair.
Suiren prepares tea as usual. It is

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“It is rare for the Moon Prince to participate in a hunt with young people.” Maomao does not call him Jinshi in front of Taomei.

"Well, you know how these things are..."

"Any problem that requires your attention?"

Jinshi frowned for a moment. After hesitating briefly, he must have come to the conclusion that it was best to tell him. He straightened up and intertwined his fingers. “I assume you’re aware of the recent disputes between the military…”

"Yes, they are being very annoying."

Thanks to them, Maomao had more work than he could handle.

“They call themselves the Empress faction, the Empress Dowager faction and things like that, but the ones causing trouble are mainly the young people.

(And you're young too...)

Maomao listens in silence.

"Among them all, there is a particularly troublesome group that will be participating in this hunt. They belong to the Empress Dowager's faction. It seems that the idea of hunting together came up during a meeting of nobles, but it is quite suspicious."

"So you came to control the situation?"

"Exactly. I want to make sure I put out any sparks before they turn into fire."

Maomao nodded, understanding the situation. At the same time, he felt a twinge of discomfort.

"Is there no danger?"

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“I don’t think the Empress Dowager’s faction would dare to harm me, at least not directly. Most likely they will try to involve me in some strange plan.”

Regardless of Jinshi’s true intentions, in everyone’s eyes he was part of the Empress Dowager’s faction. It certainly didn’t occur to these young people that the person they considered an ally was actually investigating them.

(Although there are other dangers too…)

"I bet they'll try to match you with some beauty from a good family."

"..."

Jinshi glared at Maomao.

“You have nothing to worry about. There is no one in this world more handsome than the Moon Prince.” “What does that mean?”
Jinshi smiled wryly. A long time ago, this kind of comment would have made him angry or desperate, but today the situation was different. Maomao, in turn, had to return to the main topic.

“By the way, when does the hunt start?”

"In an hour. There won't be lunch until then, so you can rest in the tent."

"Can't I go too?"

"What? It's a hunt! Do you know how to use a bow and arrow?"

“Of course not, but it would be dangerous for someone to be poisoned, wouldn’t it?” Maomao’s eyes flashed with interest. Jinshi looked at her in disbelief.

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"Don't tell me you believe the story of the legendary poisonous bird?"

“We all need a little fantasy and romance in our lives,” Maomao responds indirectly with a “yes, that’s right.”

"I never thought I would hear those words from your mouth: 'fantasy and romance'"

Jinshi shook his head in a daze as he picked up a piece of candied fruit. It looked like peaches cooked in syrup, served with crushed ice. Unlike what had happened in the summer villa, this time they wouldn’t need to worry about food, with Suiren, Taomei, and two capable assistants at their disposal.

(With these two here, you also won't have to worry about unwanted women showing up at night.)

Furthermore, although it might not seem like it, Hulang was quite skilled in dealing with this kind of situation.

"This story about a poisonous bird is nothing more than gossip.
Don't be disappointed if you can't find it."

"Anyway, I'll definitely search for every last feather."

She seemed determined to find at least one feather, even if it meant crawling on the ground with red eyes.

“If it’s Young Maomao, she’ll be very persistent,” Suiren said, placing a bowl of candied peaches in front of him as well. Jinshi nodded in approval, so Maomao gratefully held out the spoon. The tender flesh was sweet and delicious.

“About what you asked me to investigate, I discovered one thing.
It took me a while because it’s a pretty old story.”

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"How it was?" Maomao put the spoon in the bowl. Jinshi looked around for a moment. As if understanding his intention, Suiren led Hulang out of the tent, while Taomei urged Basen to follow them.

“Huh? Can’t I stay?” Huláng asked with a feigned expression of innocence, even though Maomao wanted him to leave. This false naivety was even more irritating.

“What about me?” Basen asked.

“Basen, take Hulang away,” Taomei replied.

"... All good."

Although Basen didn’t seem very convinced, he ended up obeying his mother. As soon as they left, Jinshi broke the silence.

“There are no records with a specific name. However, everything indicates that it belonged to a member of the imperial family known as Kada.”

"When..."

The name sounded familiar to Maomao.

"I see this looks familiar. I heard he's a famous name among doctors."

“The legendary doctor...”

"Exactly. But among the nobility, he is also known for another reason. It is said that he was a former member of the imperial family who was executed for breaking a taboo. I think that sounds familiar to you as well." Jinshi was referring to something that Maomao already knew.

"That's how it is."

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"Tell me what you know about him."

Maomao took a deep breath before beginning.

“It is said that he was an exceptional physician, despite being a member of the imperial family. His skill was so great that he was called by the name of the legendary physician, and he was always searching for new techniques. He even had the audacity to dissect the body of the emperor’s favorite prince at that time.”

Jinshi listened silently, shaking his head slightly. “Such an act could not be forgiven, not even by a member of the imperial family. He was executed and his name was erased from history. I heard that this is the reason why dissection remains a taboo among doctors.”

"That's how it is."

"So... the jade plate belonged to that guy, Kada?"

"Sim."

Maomao closed his eyes tightly.

Now he understood why the plaque had been carved. If doctors practiced dissection secretly and only on criminals, it was because at that time it was believed that damaging a corpse prevented the reincarnation of the soul.

(In death, the body is nothing more than flesh)

Apparently, the emperor at that time had difficulty accepting this idea.

"The fact that his badge is here means that Kada gave it to someone before he died."

"...It's more likely."

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“And who would be able to accept something like that...?”

“A pregnant woman, perhaps.” Maomao scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Maomao."

"Sim."

“Kada was a descendant of the imperial family from several generations ago. I doubt our current emperor would want to punish his descendants.”

"I hope so."

“However, it is problematic that there are people who want to steal it.”

After all, Joka came to Maomao because he feared for his safety when he discovered that someone had tried to steal that sign.

“The owner of the sign has given up on it,” Maomao made sure to make that clear.

“The owner was a woman” Maomao never mentioned that the owner was a woman. Apparently, Jinshi investigated on his own.
So that must be the reason why the number of men in House Verdigris has increased.

“What do you intend to do with a plaque that has the name erased and is also broken in two?”

"You can always make up an excuse."

"That would be very absurd, like something out of a play."

“The plays may be absurd, but the reasons why countries are founded and destroyed are sometimes even more absurd.”

Jinshi's gaze was serious.

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They couldn't let Hulang or Basen hear this conversation.
Hula ng was very unpredictable and might try to take advantage of the situation, while Basen lacked the subtlety needed to keep a secret.

"There were attempts by some lovers of the empress to found a nation or by eunuchs to establish a new kingdom."

"And I suppose those attempts ended in riots and chaos."

"Well, very rarely do they succeed."

“The story is really terrible...”

Jinshi seems distant. You've probably read many ridiculous descriptions in history books.

"Moon Prince."

"Sim?"

Jinshi didn't seem too happy with Maomao having to use that title in front of Taomei, without being able to call him “Jinshi” directly.

“About the descendants of that Kada…” Maomao hesitated for a moment.

(I know another descendant…) It was Tianyu. It wasn’t that he cared about him, but he didn’t want to cause trouble for Court Physician Liu or Physician Yang by mentioning him.

(But…) At that time, it was crucial to reveal this information. “Do you know a doctor named Tianyu?”

“Ah, you mean that peculiar young man?” Jinshi seemed to remember this. He scooped up another portion of peach with his spoon.

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“He is also a descendant of Kada.”

"Pfff?!" A piece of peach fell on Maomao's face.

“Hey, hey, excuse me.” Suiren quickly wiped Maomao’s face. To some, being splashed with the food of such a high-ranking noble would be a great honor. To Maomao, however, it was simply “disgusting.”

"I-I'm sorry. I was so surprised by what you said that..."

"It's nothing. I'm still not sure about some details, so I hesitated to tell you."

Maomao explained that Tianyu was the son of a hunter and that among his ancestors there was a daughter who had been touched by Kada.

“So it was that Tianyu…” Jinshi, who seemed to be familiar with the dissection practices of doctors, made a difficult-to-interpret expression, as if something suited him and at the same time caused him doubts.

"So... do you think he will know anything about the jade tablet?"

“I haven’t spoken to him about it,” Maomao replied firmly.

"Why not?"

“Tianyu is a man who became an official doctor out of curiosity. He lives to dissect creatures, and if it weren't for the proper guidance of court physician Liu, he would probably be a tomb raider by now, or worse, a serial killer. murderer." "Even now, if he receives information that piques his interest in a strange way, without thought for his own safety, he

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will involve other people, make a lot of noise and cause a lot of trouble."

Jinshi and Suiren's gazes are subtly directed at Maomao. It's a warm gaze, as if it hurts them.

"Something wrong?"

"No, nothing."

“Absolutely nothing,” Suiren added with a laugh, as she prepared more tea.

“I thought that perhaps that man called Wang Fang who was killed was investigating Tianyu.”

"What makes you think that?"

When Jinshi asked this, it was troublesome. It was supposed to be just Maomao’s guess. Moreover, she felt that compared to before, she had become more prone to expressing conjectures and opinions.

"Wang Fang desired the jade tablet. Although that was not his main objective, it seems that he was searching for a fallen descendant of the imperial family. It also seems that he was researching the Shin clan's family treasure."

"Ah. When we investigated the connections of the officers who killed Wang Fang, the Shin clan appeared. Unfortunately, we can't investigate further, but it seems like this guy stuck his nose where it shouldn't have." He was more interested in the reason that led to Wang Fang's death than the crime itself.

“Is this information from Chue?”

“No, he’s from Hulang… Hey, don’t you like that guy?”

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Jinshi immediately understood when he saw Maomao's displeased face.

"Would it be better if I liked him?"

"Well, yeah, I understand. But, you know, that guy has his uses,"
Jinshi says as he looks away.

“He’s a capable but troublesome subordinate, right?”

"Since he arrived they can't give me any more work. I've even reduced the sleepless nights."

“Now that you mention it, you look better than before.”
Maomao had to admit that Huláng was quite efficient.

"But is it wise to have him so close?"

“It’s like a Lahan with a different coat, not so different after all, I can handle it.” “Ugh, that sounds like the kind of subordinate no one wants to have.” Competent at his job, but capable of looking down on his superiors with a condescending attitude.

“As a second-in-command he is very good. Sometimes it seems like he even knows the weaknesses of some officers in other departments…”

“It really is like a Lahan with a different coat...”
Lahan would certainly deny it, but Mohammed did not care.

"But... we're getting off topic."

Maomao stood up and went to the entrance of the store to look outside.
Apart from the residence and the forest, there were no traces of any village.

“It seems that Tianyu’s hometown is near this area.”

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"Can we call this a coincidence?" Jinshi makes a confused face.

“I would like to believe so,” Maomao said. In his experience, nothing was more unpleasant than when coincidences piled up. Wang Fang's footprints. Tianyu and Joka, two descendants of Kada. The jade plate that was the target. And now, Tianyu's hometown was chosen as the hunting ground.

"Mmm. It's definitely nasty."

“What’s unpleasant?” Jinshi, for some reason, became concerned about his own appearance. It seemed like he thought it was him who made her feel bad.

“No, I was referring to Wang Fang. His case… well, also the factional disputes within the army, there’s something not right.”

"What doesn't fit?"

Jinshi's question made Maomao stop and think.

“I can’t say exactly, but the factions in the army should be: the Empress Dowager, the Empress, and the Neutral Faction, right? I heard that Wang Fang switched from the Neutral Faction to the Empress Faction.

"And truth."

“But then, don’t you think it’s strange? If Wang Fang belonged to the Empress’s faction, why would he be looking for another member of the imperial family? They already have a legitimate heir in the prince, Empress Gyokuyou’s son. No… “They need to find someone else to put on the throne.”

Maomao crossed her arms, thoughtful.

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“Furthermore, fights between military personnel over factional disputes are over unimportant things, as if they had no real convictions. They look like a group of young people looking for any excuse to have fun and cause trouble.”

“It’s true that there are many impulsive young people. But I think I understand what you mean.”

Jinshi’s words made her think. It was true that all the troubles she had seen so far were only caused by young people.

“I have a question: are you sure these are real factional disputes?”

"What's this for?"

"Only young people are making noise. It doesn't seem like there's anyone important behind all this."

“Now that you mention it…” Jinshi looked surprised. He had more knowledge about the political situation than Maomao, but his suspicions seemed right. “However, something doesn’t sit right with me. Have you heard that the U clan is being harassed?”

"I heard something say..."

(Actually, their leader himself told me this)

"He said something like, 'It seems I'm hated by a new military faction.'"

That was what the U clan head said. It was logical that they would seek to weaken the ancient clans, but calling it a “factional struggle” seemed excessive.

“Do you remember which clans confirmed their presence in this hunt?”

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"There were the U clan, the Chuu clan, and also the Shin clan."

(The Cinnamon…)

Maomao couldn't help but remember the man with the love letters and wondered if he was involved.

“Please, it’s time for you to prepare,” Taomei announced.

"I must stay alert."

“I agree.” Maomao clenched his fists and prepared to leave.

"..."

Jinshi, Suiren and Taomei looked at her.

"Is something wrong?"

"You stay."

"B-but... what about the poisonous bird?"

"If he shows up, I'll get him. Stay calm."

Maomao tried to follow Jinshi out of the store, but Suiren held her tightly.

Chapter 18: The Descendants of Kada

Apparently the hunt would last about four hours.

(What an outrage...) Mohammed was bored.

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"Aha! That move is a mistake," Suiren exclaimed, placing one of his pieces on the Go board.

“Are you sure?” Taomei asked, patting one of her black fries.

(How boring...) Maomao watched them with a lost look. The tent was spacious and comfortable because it was improvised, but there was nothing to do there. There was no need to clean and there were no books that could distract her for a while.

They brought board games, but she wasn't interested in them at all, so she just watched.

(It would be nice if it ended now...) At that moment, one of the guards poked his head out of the entrance.

"Something wrong?"

“There is someone asking to see Miss Maomao.”

"Who is it?"

"Un tal Tianyu."

Maomao olhou para Suiren e Taomei.

"That could happen while we're here."

"He is sure?"

"Sim."

"Everything is fine?"

"How heavy."

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Maomao reluctantly lets Tianyu in. If both of them had rejected him, he would have been spared from dealing with an annoying colleague.

(Or rather, is it okay for this guy to be here?)

If it wasn't a coincidence that they came to Tianyu's homeland, but something calculated, wouldn't it be dangerous for Tianyu to be around?

“Excuse me.” As soon as Tianyu enters the store, he looks around curiously.

(He is having fun)

"What do you need?"

“Well, since the hunt hasn’t arrived yet, I got bored.”

"Then why don't you go now?" He had certainly escaped without Li's court physician noticing. He knew he would get slapped later, but he still got slapped.

“Oh, and there seems to be a fire at my parents’ house,” Tianyu says nonchalantly as he points outside.

"Say that first!" Maomao runs out of the store.

Looking around, he sees smoke rising beyond the forest.

“It seems like there’s a fire…” “Anyway, you should have said so right away.” Maomao thinks about what she should do. She wants to check Tianyu’s house, but she can’t go alone.

"What's wrong?" A voice is heard. Turning around, he sees Basen.

“Weren’t you accompanying the Moon Prince?”

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"Today's shifts are rotating. Also, my mother asked me to keep her informed about my progress." Basen had a dissatisfied expression, it was obvious that he didn't like having to part with Jinshi.

"Basen" The one who pronounced this name was Taomei as he left the tent. She had heard the entire conversation between Jinshi and Maomao, so when Tianyu appeared and witnessed Maomao's reaction, she understood what he intended to do. She was a perceptive woman.

"Follow Maomao, Basen. The report can wait."

"Uh... where?"

"Just do what I say!"

Basen still looks confused, with question marks on his face.

"Can we go to the fire site?"

"Do you need a guide? I can take you!" Tianyu exclaimed, walking out of the tent. It would be faster if he were the one to lead them, since he was used to the forest.

"Can you do this?"

"Understood."

Both Taomei and Suiren remained silent. Suiren approached Maomao and tied his sleeves with some ribbons.

"This way you can move more easily," he told her.

"Thank you very much," Maomao replied gratefully.

"Miss Maomao, would you like me to go in your place?" Taomei offered.

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"No, thanks. I think I can behave better in this situation." Muhammad refused the offer. With the loss of vision in one eye, Taomei would have difficulty moving on uneven terrain like that.

“Is that clear, Basen? Promise me that you will take good care of Miss Maomao.”

"Understood."

Basen didn't seem to quite understand what was happening, but the seriousness of the matter did not go unnoticed.

Tianyu exclaimed, taking the lead without any worries despite being the most affected by the situation.

(As expected from a former hunter)

The foliage was so dense that sunlight barely penetrated the forest. It was easy to get lost if you weren't paying attention. The ground, covered in dry leaves, gave way beneath your feet, making progress more difficult than it seemed.

Tianyu continued to advance rapidly, leaving Maomao further and further behind.

“You’re so slow,” Basen complained, grabbing Maomao by the waist without warning.

"Oh!"

"What... what are you doing?"

(That, that isÿ)

He picked her up like a sack of rice and carried her over his shoulder in a way that was neither emotional nor

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condescending. However, he moved much faster this way, allowing Maomao to keep up with Tianyu.

“How do you find your way around without being able to see the sun?” Basen asked, expressing the same doubt that Maomao had.

“In this forest there are trees that are hundreds of years old and serve as a reference for hunters. As a child I was taught to identify them and remember their location so as not to get lost.”

Maomao noticed that every now and then the trunk of a huge tree would appear among the undergrowth.

“It’s close to here...” Tianyu announced, stopping walking. As they suspected, the smoke was coming from a group of houses. An ominous atmosphere could be felt in the surroundings with the naked eye. Jinshi's assumption that the young nobles were looking for trouble was true.

"WHAT THE HELL?" Basen shouted in anger, clearly outraged. An intolerable scene unfolded before his eyes. A group of well-dressed young men surrounded a middle-aged man with a hunter's face, threatening him with drawn swords while laughing arrogantly.

“Oh, it’s my father,” Tianyu exclaimed, about to approach them, but Maomao stopped him.

"¡Detente!"

"Why?"

“If you leave, it will only complicate things. Let’s leave this to Basen.”

(Although I also feel insecure around him, but…)

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Still, it was preferable for Tianyu to enter the lion's den.

"What the hell are they doing?" Basen approached with firm steps. Maomao watched them from the safety of the forest.

"My God... but it's the honorable Basen," said one of the young men, turning his head.

"As you can see, we are eliminating a criminal."

"A criminal? Is this man a criminal?" Basen still doesn't fully understand the situation.

“This is the house of one of the hunters in the area,” Maomao explained from his hiding place.

"Well? That doesn't explain why they burned down his house and threatened the inhabitants."

“Well, what do you think of that?” said the young man, dropping something on the floor with a mocking gesture.

It was half a jade plate. Identical to what Joka had, except for the position of the cut.

(I knew...)

Joka's father and Tianyu's family must have been related in the past, and for some reason, they shared the jade pendant.

“This pendant belonged to a man who committed a heinous crime: attempting to kill a crown prince. “Can such a criminal live peacefully, free from all guilt?”

(This version doesn't suit me...)

Maomao learned that the prince in question had died of illness and that Kada dissected his body after his death, angering the emperor and

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condemning him.

(Has history become distorted over time?)

It was normal for people to exaggerate stories. The doctors' version had to be authentic, which coincided with what Jinshi also knew.

Even though the flames were rising from the house, would Jinshi be able to see them from a distance? I hoped he would realize something was wrong and come over immediately.

Meanwhile, the young man continued with his speech…

"To kill him, they used zhen poison. During a banquet, while the prince was unprepared, they gave him wine to drink mixed with the feathers of the poisonous bird. And not content with that, to supplant him, he dismembered his body and tried to appear before the emperor covered in his skin. It is evident that the descendants of such an evil being are nothing more than monsters."

(So when they talked about zhen, they were referring to this?)

Maomao's face froze. I couldn't believe that this was the reason they invented that bird thing.
poisonous.

(You probably think you said something clever, but it's not funny!)

Like a wild boar about to charge, Maomao began to scratch the ground with her foot, as if she was ready to attack. Basen watched her blankly, completely oblivious to the situation.
Both Jinshi and she avoided giving him information. He looked at her, seeking an explanation.

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“Well, about that-” Tianyu tried to intervene, but Maomao kicked him in the shin and moved in front of him.

“That’s wrong,” Maomao declared, raising his voice. He couldn’t just sit idly by. He couldn’t bear to be used to slander the legendary bird in this way.

"Who are you?"

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Maomao wasn't very good at remembering faces, so she didn't know which clan this particular youth belonged to, but when she remembered that they belonged to noble families, she decided to do this trick.

“Excuse my boldness, but haven’t we met before? Didn’t we meet at the noble families’ gathering?” Maomao bowed exaggeratedly politely.

“Ah!”

One of the young men seemed to recognize her. Looking closely, it was a military man I saw from time to time who visited the infirmary. In fact, he was the man from the Shin clan’s love letters.

(This guy again?)

This guy brings trouble wherever he goes, he thought, feeling sorry for the matriarch of the Shin clan. However, it was noticeable that the young nobleman was not as confident as usual, probably due to Basen’s imposing presence.

"The prince did not die of poisoning, but of illness. And they did not dismember his body or try to steal his identity. What they did was dissect him."

Maomao struggled to keep calm as he spoke. Although he really enjoyed throwing horse dung at those arrogant young men.

“Dissection? Did they do something so horrible?

Basen is clearly horrified, his simplicity is both a virtue and a flaw.

“So by making hunting and dismembering animals their job, these people were able to survive.”

“¡…!”

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Tianyu’s father was the very image of a natural hunter: burly and tanned, with a rough beard that covered half his face and a piercing gaze beneath his thick eyebrows. He wore simple, practical clothes. He looked nothing like his son.

“Well, you eat these animals without any problem,” Maomao accidentally let out a sincere comment.

“Hey, you?!” Basen frowned, clearly offended by the comment.

“Niang Niang doesn’t say anything good, right?” Tianyu, for some reason, was smiling widely. He didn’t seem to care that his father had a sword pointed at him as he remained kneeling on the ground.

Tianyu's father seems to notice Tianyu's presence, but tries to remain calm so as not to alert the youngsters. Furthermore, he seems to sense another presence, so he lowers his head as if nothing is happening.

"Did you say something, girl?"

“No, nothing important.” Maomao maintained a neutral expression as he walked over to pick up the jade plate that had fallen to the ground.

(It's identical...)

It was the same as Joka's. The edges of the fracture have worn away over time, but the two pieces should fit together perfectly.

"Even if he was a criminal, he was certainly a high-ranking person at the time."

“A criminal is a criminal, no matter what his position. His depravity is such that it must be passed on to his descendants.”

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Maomao carefully examined the jade. It seemed that those young men did not know that the original owner of the plaque belonged to the imperial family.

"For your children and grandchildren?" Mohammed asked, seeking confirmation.

"Ha ha. I guess those ancestors had their own problems too, huh?"

(That's what I wanted to hear...) Maomao raised the jade plate high.

“T-That’s right… but what do you think?” commented the young man, addressing the person who had just arrived.

“Let’s see…” A beautiful voice was heard, like the flow of water. The slightly affected tone was one that Maomao had heard many times in his days in the inner palace.

"Maybe even I have some guilt."

A deliberately slow and soft voice, as if asking a question. The owner of the voice came from the opposite side of the forest.

“P-Moon Prince?!” The youth bowed. Jinshi wore a disheveled smile that was reminiscent of her days as a eunuch. However, she no longer had the appearance of a celestial goddess of old.
The scar that crossed his right cheek and his look of contempt towards the insolent gave him a somewhat rougher appearance.

“You said that jade token was proof of being a criminal, right?”

"S-Sim."

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"Yes. They are descendants of those who wronged a noble prince in the past. The fact that they still keep this plaque suggests that they might even be thinking of overthrowing the country. We propose that they be eliminated as soon as possible. You, Moon Prince, being the second noblest person in this country, surely he could do it."

(The second noblest person in the country?) These were words that should never be uttered in court. Jinshi was the emperor's younger brother, and the imperial prince, the emperor's son, was currently the crown prince, the second noblest person in the country.

Jinshi smiled with just his mouth.

“In our country, justice is not allowed by one’s own hands”

“But isn’t it important to remove the rotten seeds beforehand? Furthermore, if the Moon Prince were to order it now, it would be easy to separate this person's head from the body. hand it over to this insolent man..."

Tianyu's father is nervous.

(Please wait a little longer)

Maomao understood this better than anyone. He had experienced the pursuit of bandits and the fear of dying at their hands. The terror and tension of that situation tightened his stomach until it physically hurt.

“I see... So it’s not enough to punish their descendants, their ancestors would also have to be blamed...” Jinshi laughed, placing his hand inside his cloak as he approached the group that followed him closely with a smug smile, escorted by his guards and followed by several young nobles who watched the scene with an air of astonishment.

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Jinshi walked past Tianyu's father and the rowdy youths and stopped in front of Maomao, taking out from his robe something very similar to what she was holding in her hand.

"T-that's...?!"

The young men's faces instantly turned pale.

Jinshi took the pendant Maomao offered him and, putting the two pieces together, showed them to the group. Just as they thought, they fit together perfectly.

"See? I already knew the story of the alleged criminal, but do you know why I didn't do anything about it?"

His gaze fixed on the arrogant youths, who were now watching him with their heads lowered.

“Your ancestor has already received his punishment. There is no need to continue punishing the descendants.” Jinshi put the two pieces of jade together and showed them to the youth.

“And if you truly believe that the sins of the ancestors should be judged… Then I myself would have a lot to answer for.”
With a theatrical gesture, Jinshi placed his hand on his chest, as if he was wounded by a painful pain. revelation.

“That criminal… also belonged to the imperial family.
We share the same blood!” Saying this, Jinshi’s eyes showed contempt.

The young men had not expected this reaction. They assumed that he would approve of their actions and even enjoy the punishment meted out to Tianyu’s father. It was clear that they were completely unfamiliar with the man they believed they were manipulating.

(Well, they're not the only ones...)

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Despite his beauty and apparent affability, Jinshi was not an easy man to deceive. He was methodical, observant, and very meticulous in his judgments. He never let himself be fooled by appearances.

"My apologies. My subordinates acted on their own," Jinshi said as he placed his hand on the shoulder of Tianyu's father, who still had his head lowered.

"You have no reason to apologize. I expect nothing in return. If my family is a problem... I will be the last to pay.
End me here and now, thus ensuring that my bloodline disappears forever."

Tianyu's father kept his head lowered, unable to look at the man who held such a high position in the court.

“With all due respect… that doesn’t seem right to me.” Tianyu’s voice broke through the tense silence. “Old man, don’t say things like that. That attitude doesn’t suit you.”

"…"

Tianyu's father pleaded with his eyes: “Don't talk, idiot.”

“Are you planning to punish me, Moon Prince?” Tianyu asked boldly.

"Is there any reason to do this?"

“No. At least I don’t see it.” Tianyu kept his gaze fixed on Jinshi, without a hint of fear. “In that case, could you promise me and my father that we will be safe?”

"You don't need to ask."

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"And while we're at it... is there anything I can do about the fire? Flames may spread to the forest."

Jinshi gave Hulang a meaningful look. Hulang smiled evilly and turned to the other youths.

“Let’s put out the fire, people. We have to take responsibility for our actions.”

(What's wrong with this?)

Maomao snorted, tired of Hulang’s arrogant attitude, and walked over to Tianyu’s father. Although she was a doctor, Tianyu wasn’t very skilled with wounds and external injuries, so she could take better care of him.

Tianyu's father sighed, a little calmer, even without letting his guard down.

"Should we retreat to the tent?"

"Let's do it."

After obtaining Jinshi's approval, Maomao prepared to leave. But before we do that...

“Ah, so in the end, the legendary poisonous bird doesn’t exist.” That last sentence made Maomao want to disappear into the flames of fire.

"¡Ah, Niang Niang!"

“Now what do you want?” She didn’t even feel like being polite to Tianyu anymore.

“I don’t know anything about poisonous birds, but it seems that in my house there is a book left by a certain Kada.”

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"Que?!"

Maomao's eyes fixed on the house engulfed in flames.

“Niang Niang likes those old books, right?”

Without thinking twice, Maomao snatched the wooden cube from one of the young men who was running

with water to try to put out the fire.

"Hey... what are you doing?"

"Just leave it to me for a moment."

Maomao emptied the bucket of water and ran towards the house, determined to go inside.

“A-Are you crazy?!” Jinshi stopped her in her tracks.

“Please let me in. Inside that house is a treasure, a treasure!”

"Give up! It's already burned out completely!

Maomao, soaked and snot dripping, reaches out toward the burning house.

“So this is the honorable daughter of the Great Commander Khan.”

“You can't fight blood.”

Muhammad did not even have the strength to respond to them.

Chapter 19: The Lost Treasure - Part One

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Tianyu's father was being treated by the court physician Li. Apart from a few scratches on his knees and a small cut on his neck, he had no serious injuries.

In reality, Muhammad was in a much worse state. His face was smeared with soot, snot, and tears. Her clothes were soaked, and upon returning to the tent, Suiren hurriedly changed them, making her look a little more presentable.

(The book of Kada…)

She never imagined that it actually existed. When she heard about it from Kokuyou in the red-light district, she thought it would be wonderful if it existed, but she wasn't entirely convinced.
“Although it’s not a serious injury, I’m very grateful that you treated me with such care.”

Tianyu's father, besides not resembling him physically, also didn't resemble him in personality. Although he was a rough hunter, his demeanor was refined and polite.

"It's nothing, don't worry."

"With a little saliva he would have been cured, it was no big deal"
Tianyu, with his carefree tone, spoke as if it was none of his business, causing Court Physician Li to knock him on the head with his knuckles.

"Ah! I'm so sorry, your son..." Court Physician Li hurriedly apologized to Tianyu's father.

“No problem. Please try to do everything you can until your skull breaks.” It seemed like Tianyu's father was serious.

“If it breaks, we will review the content.”

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Sometimes it was hard to tell whether Court Doctor Li was joking or serious.

"Hahaha! Do they hate me that much?"

At this moment, Maomao and the others were in one of the tents that Hulang had prepared. It served as a bathroom for the guards and was equipped with medical supplies.

"Is this a good time?"

Basen stuck his head out. He seemed to be waiting for them to finish talking.

"Yes, go ahead."

Maomao responds generally and Jinshi and Hulang enter the store.

"What should I do?"

Court physician Li, who was there because he was a doctor, noticed that he was an outsider in the conversation and suggested that he leave.

“Please wait outside.”

"Understood."

Court Doctor Li left the tent. Inside the store, Maomao, Tianyu, Tianyu's father, Jinshi, Basen, and Hulang remained.
Honestly, Maomao felt that Basen and Hulang were unnecessary.

“Moon Prince, we don’t need Hulang, do we?” Maomao suggests expelling him.

Jinshi said that Hulang was similar to Lahan. Therefore, Maomao assumed that he would treat it the same way he would treat Lahan, or

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that is, with clemency.

“Isn’t that a bit cruel, Miss Maomao?” Hulang smiles as he says this, and Basen looks displeased. It seems like you don’t get along with him.

“Please be patient this time.” As Jinshi says this, Maomao no longer insists.

"First, let me apologize."

“No, it is not necessary.”

Tianyu's father bows deeply, even gets up from his seat and sits directly on the carpet.

“I appreciate your consideration for the descendants of a criminal. With my dirty appearance, I shouldn’t even be here in front of you,” Tianyu’s father said.

"Don't worry. I'm just asking, are you really Tianyu's father?"

"Sim."

Jinshi also seemed to have the same doubt as Maomao.

"She looks like her mother, right?"

(Wouldn't it be from another father?) A very impolite thought crossed Maomao's mind, but she decided not to say it out loud, out of respect for Tianyu's father.

“I have a few questions. First, is it true that you are a descendant of Kada?”

"That's right. My great-grandmother got involved with a doctor who frequented the hunting area. When she became pregnant, the doctor gave her the

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she is this jade plate."

Everyone focused their attention on the jade plate.

“However, later that doctor angered the emperor at the time and was executed. If my great-grandmother’s pregnancy had been discovered, both she and her baby, and even our entire family, would have been executed. Crying, he damaged the tablet so that the engraving could not be read. Although he could have thrown it away, he could not do so.

“Is there any reason why the plate is broken into two pieces?”

“This is my brother’s fault. My great-grandmother kept it very carefully so that no one would know, but she couldn’t throw it away. However, my brother started saying that “some imperial treasure was hidden somewhere” and tried to take it away. My father wouldn’t let him and said that I, as her brother, also had a right to it. In the end, my brother broke the plate in two and took half of it before disappearing.”

Tianyu's father looked at the jade plate curiously.

"How is he here?"

"I will answer that question." Maomao raised his hand.

“About thirty years ago, a courtesan in the capital had a son, and this object was given to her by the child's father, who was one of her clients. The daughter who was born of this union kept half of it, but for certain reasons, it was entrusted to the Prince of the Moon.”

"I see."

Tianyu's father looked at the jade plate with a thoughtful expression.

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"Do you want to see that daughter?"

Maomao thought that perhaps it wasn't her place to ask, but she did so anyway. Although Tianyu's brother's whereabouts were unknown, this daughter would be her niece.

"No, I don't think it would be better."

"Hey! But I want to meet her! She's my cousin!"

Tianyu's opinion was ignored, and instead, his father's fist fell on his head, instead of the court physician Li's fist.

"It's funny how these destinies crossed."

Jinshi runs his finger along the scars on the jade board. The marks on the broken jade form a series of horizontal and diagonal lines.

Maomao looked at the plate, feeling some discomfort with the brands.

"I will compensate for the medical expenses and the burned house. Furthermore, I will demand compensation from the idiots who caused the problem."
"That would be too much, I can't accept it. But please, could you grant me one wish?"

"What kind of wish?"

Tianyu's father took a deep breath before speaking.

"I would like you to find the treasure my brother was looking for and get rid of it."

For a moment, Maomao didn't understand what he was saying. The word "secret treasure" repeated in his mind and he was finally able to move.

"Secret treasure!?"

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Maomao's eyes flashed with excitement.

“Is it possible that you are referring to the Book of Kada?” “That’s how

it is.”

"¡OHHHH!"

Maomao quickly formed a proximity to Tianyu.

“Wait, wait!” Jinshi grabbed her by the collar of her clothes, lifting her up like a cat.

"Weren't you burned in the fire just now?" Maomao asked as he moved his feet in the air.

"No, we don't know where the treasure is. Apparently my great-grandmother hid it before she died, but nothing was found in the house. However, she left the jade tablet and a note asking that it be destroyed if it fell into the wrong hands."

“That’s what made my uncle leave, right?”

"Be quiet!"

Tianyu receives another blow to the head.

If the Book of Kada were found, it would probably be treated as a forbidden book. But its medical content was very valuable.

“Is there any place or thing that could serve as a clue?” Jinshi slowly placed Maomao on the ground as he asked the question.

“I don’t think there was anything in particular. However, they say my great-grandmother didn’t travel much.”

“Then he must have hidden it nearby,” Jinshi mused aloud.

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It seemed that Basen was also thinking, as Tianyu moved his head from side to side, looking around. Hulang walked out of the store, as if he had an idea, and quickly returned.

"What was your great-grandmother's range of motion?"

What Hulang brought was a map of the area. The map showed rivers, forests, and some nearby villages.

Tianyu's father points to the forest area and nearby villages.

“Apparently he spoke to my brother several times, but by the time I was conscious he had already passed away. However, even though he had traveled, he didn’t go very far from here.”

Tianyu's father pointed to the forest area and nearby villages.

"I would just go hunting, sell furs and meat. Also shop."

"It seems so."

From her great-grandmother's words, it didn't seem like she had strayed far from her area of residence.

(If it's hidden nearby, where could it be?)

Maomao looked at the jade plate.

"Hum?"

"What's wrong?"

"One moment, please."

Maomao placed the two halves of the jade tablet on the map.
When joined together, they formed a rectangle, and the ratio of length to width roughly corresponded to the north-south and east-west ratio of the forest.

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Maomao looked at the marks on the jade plate. There were lines drawn horizontally and diagonally. It was a scratch that caught his attention for a while.

(Could it be?)

"Do you have a pen?"

"Yes, here it is."

Hulang offered it to him and Maomao rudely accepted.

“There is a big tree in this forest, right?”

It's the tree that Tianyu used as a reference.

“Yes, there is.”

“Is it hundreds of years old?”

"What are you talking about?" Basen didn't understand and scratched his head.

“Please tell us where the big tree is.”

Since the large tree was used as a landmark in the forest, they should have had a rough idea of its location.

"Understood."

Maomao marked the places indicated by Tianyu's father.

“I think that’s it.”

Maomao placed the jade tablet on the map, calculating the vertical and horizontal proportions, while connecting the corresponding circles with lines.

“The lengths, proportions and angles seem to match.”

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He drew lines horizontally and diagonally. The lines perfectly matched the markings on the jade plate.
After drawing all the lines aligned with the marks, you are left with an unconnected circle.

"It just can't be."

(If the jade tokens were split into two, it wouldn't be possible to understand)

The key was in the jade tokens. Not only was the surface of the chips scratched, but several marks were also made on them for this purpose.

“Let’s go to this place.”

Maomao took the map and left the store.

Chapter 20: The Lost Treasure - Part Two

Maomao, her eyes shining with excitement, was being carried by Jinshi.
And what’s more, she was being carried in an inelegant manner, as if she were a sack of rice.

(How did we get to this?)

Maomao wanted to get to the place as quickly as possible. So, to save time, she asked Basen to drive her.

“No, wait a minute.” Even Basen was hesitant.

Not even in an emergency like this would he dare to ask something like that of Basen, since Maomao still maintained a certain modesty. But the situation was critical. I had to get that treasure as soon as possible!

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“It’s impossible.” The moment Basen tried to catch her, another person got in his way.

“I’ll take care of it.” It was Jinshi.

And that's how Mohammed ended up being carried by him.

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“Master Jinshi…” Since there was no one around who could hear, Maomao addressed him by name, not “Moon Prince.”

“Don’t you think there are better ways to carry a person?”

"I think so."

"Then why are you carrying me like this?"

“…”

Jinshi looked grumpy.

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"I shouldn't touch you too much, right?" Jinshi chose a way to hold Maomao with as little contact as possible.

“Don’t worry, babies aren’t made by touch alone.”

“I know! But you don’t have to be so direct.”

"As you say, sir."

Despite her angry expression, Maomao could tell that Jinshi was trying hard not to shake her too much as she ran.
So he decided to stop complaining and settle for his uncomfortable rice bag role.

Thanks to Jinshi’s speed, they immediately arrived at the tree that Tianyu had pointed out to them. It was a gigantic tree, hundreds of years old, and its trunk was so thick that it would take at least three people to hug it completely.

"Is there really something here?" Tianyu asked as he yawned, immune to the tension of the moment.

“If he hid it here, he’s probably at the base.”

For the part that required brute force, it was best to let Basen handle it. The guard began to dig vigorously, sinking his shovel into the soft earth filled with dry leaves. But as they got closer to the roots of the tree, the earth became harder and more compact.

"There doesn't seem to be anything."

"We've already dug up everything around the roots."

“What if it’s somewhere else?”

While everyone was voicing their complaints, Basen continued digging.

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And then...

"¡!?"

Basen dropped the shovel and began digging with her hands. Maomao tried to help, but the ground was too hard for her.

"Is this it?"

Basen picked up something that at first glance looked like a large rock or a piece of dry earth. But when he shook it, a hollow sound was heard inside.

"It's covered in mud, isn't it?"

Letting Basen break it with his own hands could be too risky, so Maomao took a wooden mallet and began to carefully hit the clay, avoiding damaging the contents. As the clay fell in pieces, the shape of a clay pot appeared, with its mouth tightly closed. Inside, a rectangular object could be seen.

"¡!?"

In a fit of emotion, Maomao reached out to grab the pot, but Jinshi snatched it away before she could touch it.

"W-what are you doing?"

"If you touch it now, right here, the contents may be damaged."

Hearing Jinshi's warning, Maomao instantly turned pale.
It was true that they had found the book, but the pages must have been damp and stuck together after being underground for so long.
Any wrong move can cause them to break.

“So… this is the treasure?” Tianyu’s father watched this scene solemnly. He seemed moved, but he avoided touching the object.

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"This doesn't belong to me anymore."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. For me, just know that we found what my brother was looking for."

Tianyu's father probably changed his way of thinking thanks to his brother. He stubbornly remained distant from the imperial family and tried to restrain his son from repeating the great sin of dissection that his ancestors committed.

However, Tianyu ended up becoming a doctor who excelled in surgical skills, although his main motivation was not ethics or morality, but a morbid curiosity about the human body. An irony of fate.

Tianyu's father had many thoughts about his son, but Tianyu didn't seem to have any thoughts about his father. In a play, there might be a touching scene between father and son, but that wasn't the case here. That's probably what defines the man Tianyu is.

(Well, every family has its own problems)

There should be no more punishments or executions, so the burden on Tianyu's father's shoulders should have lessened.

Maomao thought so, but he could not take his eyes off the deteriorated book.

"Maestro Jinshi."

"What's wrong?"

“What are you going to do with the book?”

“We will take it to a trusted craftsman to restore it.”

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"And can I see this first?"

“I can’t promise you’ll be the first, but if it has to do with medicine, I’ll let you see it at some point.”

Maomao clenched his fists tightly.

With this new expectation for the future, Maomao came back jumping with excitement.

Chapter 21: The Way Back

The busy day has come to an end.

"And I thought I was coming to work..."

Court Physician Li ended his participation by tending to Tianyu's father's injuries. At least he had something to do.
They should consider themselves lucky to have escaped the incident unscathed. The young men who had tried to lynch the poor hunter would reflect on their actions for a while now. After all, they had defied the emperor’s own brother. It was likely that they would not rise in their careers again for a long time. As for the man with the Shin clan’s love letters… perhaps this time they would disown him completely.

The other participants also ended the hunt without knowing what had happened. Everyone was dissatisfied, but Maomao was happy.

(What kind of book will it be?) His heart was pounding with excitement.
So he didn't think much about it.

“Maomao, you will go in this carriage,” Suiren said to him.

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“As you ask.”

Maomao entered the carriage without question.

"…"

Inside the carriage, a handsome nobleman was sitting in the carriage. And, to Mohammed's surprise, they were alone, with no one else. An awkward silence fell over them both.

(The nanny set me up) Before, the most uncomfortable person in this situation would have been Maomao, but this time Jinshi's face showed greater discomfort.

“Why are you here?” Jinshi said.

“Madam Suiren told me to get into this carriage,” Maomao replied.

Maomao leaned back in his seat. The carriage, designed for the royal family, was much more comfortable than the one they used on the way.

“If you want, eat something, Maomao.”

Suiren offered Maomao a drink. It was fruit water with ice cubes.

“You can order more if you want.” With that, Suiren got out of the carriage.

(Very attentive)

Maomao leaned back a little.

"You look quite comfortable."

“I’m sorry.” Maomao quickly straightened his posture.

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“No, no, get comfortable.” Jinshi rolled the container of fruit water in his hands before placing it on the table. The float was so well equipped that the container fit perfectly on a special support so that it would not move during the journey.

"Just as you expected, they did something very stupid."

"Yes. I don't understand why they thought that would make me happy."

“Well, it’s not easy to know what makes you happy, Master Jinshi.”

“For years you have pretended to be a eunuch, without appearing in public much. After you stopped pretending, you were only given boring tasks. smile, without getting into serious conversations, TRUE?"

“Fake, you say?” Jinshi frowned, clearly irritated.

“You spent a year in the Western Capital, so it’s not strange that people don’t understand you well. Hearing how you suppressed the Shi Clan, they probably thought you were as stern as a hawk.

Today’s young people didn’t know about Jinshi who showed such a childish expression. (I wonder who thought Jinshi would enjoy execution?) Maomao was curious about the origin of these rumors.

“By the way, Master Jinshi, there is something that worries me.”

"What is it?"

“Can petty squabbles within the military really be considered factional fighting?”

“I wonder too…”

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It is true that those young people acted impulsively, letting themselves be carried away by their emotions without thinking much. They didn't seem guided by any real conviction.

"You should investigate where they heard these rumors about Kada's descendants."

“Yes, I’ll let a trusted subordinate take care of it.” Jinshi drank her fruit water slowly, her gestures somewhat careless, but Maomao didn’t mind. Without the nanny present, I preferred to let her do whatever she wanted.

"But you're ahead of yourself again. Couldn't you wait for me to come back?" Jinshi was referring to the time when Maomao hurriedly headed to Tianyu's father's house, which had been burned down.

“Well, I thought it was a situation where I should go immediately. I received permission from Lady Suiren, and with Master Basen as my escort, the first thing would be to worry about the enemy.”

Basen was from a noble family, and he was also very strong. Even against other nobles, with Basen by his side, Maomao thought that no one would dare to confront them. In fact, the young man who was obsessed with love letters showed fear of Basen.

“I understand, but I want you to be more careful. Over the past year, the eccentric strategist’s influence has waned a bit.”

(And what?)

“I won’t hide behind that old man’s prestige,” he replied. Maomao grimaced in genuine disgust. Still, he had learned to use his influence when it suited him, which perhaps caused his attitude to soften a little.

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“As eccentric as he is, it won’t be long before he regains control. Furthermore, if today’s incident becomes public, the skirmishes among the young men in the army will probably calm down as well. Maomao thought this would serve as a good warning to them.”

“Master Jinshi, perhaps you should show yourself a little more.”

“It’s better not to show myself if it means dealing with troubled guys unnecessarily.”

Jinshi's cup was empty, so Maomao poured him more fruit water.

"You don't have to show yourself to everyone."

“I see.” Jinshi observed her carefully before slowly reaching out his hand towards her. His fingers stopped just before touching Maomao’s hand.

"Aren't you going to touch me?" When Maomao asked him, Jinshi made a strange expression.

“I’m dying to touch you. Not only that... I also want to hug you, hold you tight...”

“It doesn’t look like you’re going to do that,” Maomao said to him mockingly. Before, Jinshi would touch her whenever he wanted, no matter what she said. But lately, he seemed to be avoiding her. Today, he even carried her around like she was a sack of rice.

"I'm holding back because if I don't, I won't be able to control myself."

"Will he not be able to control himself?"

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“If I touch you... I'm afraid I won't be able to control myself. I'll end up biting and licking you.”

“I felt a chill.” Maomao narrowed his eyes slightly. He got goosebumps.

Although he could be forgiven for his handsome face, all in all, it is a statement from a pervert. If Lahan had said something like that, Maomao would have stomped on him and probably stabbed him with a spear, for looking unpleasant.

"That is extremely rude."

Jinshi was not angry, he simply looked at Maomao with disapproval.

“So, since we’re being rude…” Maomao felt like playing a prank on him. He drank the rest of the fruit water, his fingers growing damp from the condensation on the cup. With her fingers still wet, she directed them toward Jinshi and placed her index finger on his wrist.

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"¡¿?!"

Jinshi tensed. His wrist moved slightly.

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Maomao's index finger slid from Jinshi's wrist to the back of his hand and then to his middle finger. It left a wet trail as if a snail had passed through it. Finally, he lightly pressed the nail on his middle finger before removing his hand.

"...Seriously, you..."

"What is happening?"

“You seem to think your calling is to be an apothecary, but it seems you would also have talent as a courtesan.” “Is that a compliment?” Maomao frowned, somewhat irritated. For his part, Jinshi looked away, clearly uncomfortable.

(Maybe I got a little ahead of myself with the joke)

The carriage had just left and there was still a long way to go before reaching the capital. The uncomfortable atmosphere continued throughout the journey.

Final Chapter: The Bearer of Ill Will

"Smoke-smoke-smoke"

Chue hummed as she walked through the palace. It wasn’t that she didn’t have a job; simply put, the loss of her regular position as the Moon Prince’s attendant left her with free time, though her days remained hectic and busy.

Now, the task assigned to him was to track down the source of the suspicious rumors circulating in the court.

There was some conspiracy going on. People would think that there might be some great intrigue behind such rumors. In the

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However, the first signs of a serious incident often arise from small and trivial things. A small rumor can ruin a trader's business or even destroy a reputation.

In the western capital they had already witnessed something similar.

The more insecure people felt, the more vulnerable they were to gossip and misinformation. And Chue loved to see people panic and become confused. Not that she enjoyed suffering, of course... But knowing how to stay calm in times of chaos was an advantage in life, and she had learned to do it perfectly.

Chue's fate led her to the military officer training camp. Moving her right hand weakly and jumping lightly, she looked for the person who had been pointed out to her.

Finally, he saw the police officers at the break.

"Here you go, water."

"Ah, thank you." The man who offered the bamboo tube was too thin to be a military officer. This weak man, who appeared to be suffering from a back injury, was taking care of the other police officers.

Even the smallest creatures had their way of surviving. And Chue knew this better than anyone, having been at the bottom of the food chain for a long time herself.

But even the weakest managed to survive, and sometimes that weakness became their best weapon.

As the saying goes, “The lion cannot live without the gazelle. Carnivores depended on herbivores for food, while the latter could live perfectly well without the presence of the former.”

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That servile soldier devoted himself to pleasing his stronger companions, offering them cold water and food that he said was delicious. And although from time to time one of them would hit him to let off steam, it never went too far. They needed someone to serve them, and he was the best suited for that task. It was better to keep him alive, they reminded each other.

Chue followed the weak man. He headed to a place far away from the training ground. The well was not connected to a river, but rather to groundwater, so the water was cooler and clearer than other wells. It was somewhat out of the way, so police officers usually didn't use it.

“Can I speak with you for a moment, Master Jun?”

"What's on offer? You can call me Jun, it doesn't matter.
Do you mind if I keep working?"

"No, it doesn't bother me at all."

Ujun, as his name suggests, was a member of the U clan, but he was not allowed to use the character 'U' in his name. People usually called him Jun.

Her father had been the former head of the U clan, but had fallen from grace. Her sister, who had been pampered as a princess of the U clan, behaved arrogantly and directly intervened with the princess, putting her in a situation of near confinement.

Jun was the only one left and was left as a sort of lesson.
Although he was part of the renowned clan, he was an outcast. An outcast who still belonged to a noble family, like a man who was neither beast nor bird, but a bat. Jun, who worked as a civil servant thanks to his father's connection, was transferred to a military post due to his father's downfall.
It was a punishment that should not have happened, but when the superior's feelings were in

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game, things could change. There was a clear intention for him to leave his job soon.

However, Jun did not give up. He was too weak to be a threat to anyone. The absence of threat can create a sense of security. People trusted him with the illusion that there was no reason to worry.

That's why no one would think of it. No one would suspect that the cold water from the bamboo cylinder or the salted dried meat contains poison. Of course, it doesn't contain poison. Its poison is something different.

“Jun, do you know a person called Wang Fang?”

"Yes, I know him. The officer who likes dried meat, right? Since he had a handsome face, I remember seeing him chatting with the court ladies many times."

"Did you know he passed away?"

“It’s a well-known fact. It’s said that he hanged himself in Grand Commander Kan’s office, which was surprising,” Jun said as he filled the bamboo cylinder with well water.

“What kind of conversations did you have with Mr. Wang Fang?”

“We just talked about trivial things, like how my father and sister caused trouble and sent me here as punishment.”

“So, you were talking about the U clan’s matters?”

"Yes. I'm a man without hobbies; I can only talk about my home and my work," he said, grinning from ear to ear. Chue responded with an equally fake smile.

Chue was sure. He is the same type as her.

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“Have you seen the dragon decorative item that was in the U clan’s residence?”

“The dragon ornament… Yes, I vaguely remember something like that, I think I saw the clan head looking at it occasionally.”

"Have you talked to Mr. Wang Fang about this?"

"I'm not sure..."

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Jun is a weak creature. Weak creatures are pressured by strong ones to tell interesting stories; that's why you need to collect rumors and stories. Therefore, it is necessary for them to accumulate rumors and gossip in order to survive.

Weak beings submit and listen. Ujun was like a rabbit in that sense.

"Interestingly, the young military officers who have been causing trouble recently are all those you served."

“Young people are always passionate, right?”

His tone suggested he was no longer young.

"Yes. The passionate emotions of young people always seek an outlet, whether in food, women, or a show of strength."

“I can’t understand this.” Jun’s attitude was the same, stating that it had nothing to do with him.

"And recently, they finally made a big mistake. They tried to please the emperor's secretive and enigmatic brother by inviting him on a hunt."

“The emperor’s brother on a hunt? That’s quite unusual.”

"Yes. And on top of that, those young men attacked an innocent hunter and tried to execute the man as a criminal, thinking that it would please the emperor's brother."

“It doesn’t make sense. Why punish a hunter?” Jun continues drawing water.

“The hunters were descendants of those who had once harmed the imperial family; they mistakenly thought that if

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punish those hunters, they would make the prince happy. Though, to be honest, I doubt the Emperor's brother would even think of punishing someone for crimes committed generations ago. "Who could have invented something like this?"

"People often get carried away by their convictions once they start."

“Yes, you’re right.” Chue tilted his body, watching Ujun as he continued his task.

“Was it you who led those young men?”

"What are you talking about?" Jun covered the bamboo cylinder.

“It’s a rumor, nothing more. There is a criminal clan that once killed a member of the imperial family. Now they are lowly hunters, but the Moon Prince will not allow that sinner to live. This rumor…” You are the origin, right, Jun?” “That’s a rather extreme interpretation.” Jun did not deny that this was the origin.

“I only heard the court doctors turn pale talking about taboos. The existing rumors might have gotten mixed up there, right?”

“So, do you know who gave them the specific information about the place?”

“I didn’t say anything about the location. I just said that if it was the sinner clan, they would fear the imperial family. If they didn’t respond well, they would probably do so if it were them.”

Chue admired this man, who could feign innocence until the end.

Ujun certainly spread rumors in various places. Always a weak figure, like a bat that is neither bird nor beast,

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sowing small sparks of discord in the army.

Who would believe that this weakling, weaker than any other, is the cause of disputes between factions?

"Why did you spread these rumors?"

“I have no hidden intentions. If you understand that, you should understand my weakness.

It was a trivial evil.

What Jun hates is not the powerful or politics. He only hates those who pride themselves on being strong.

“Furthermore, even if I didn’t say anything, many people will use all sorts of methods to get close to the Emperor’s brother in the future. He is a strong, handsome, and diligent person.”

"Diligent, you say?"

"Yes. Otherwise, I wouldn't spend a year in the western capital."

Jun is a man with a good outlook. That's what Chue thought.

“Apart from His Imperial Majesty, the Imperial Prince is the only healthy, adult, and competent member. However, if something were to happen to the Emperor now, the young prince would occupy the throne. relatives.”

"So this is how rumors spread?" Instilling fear and desires and manipulating the actions of others. The military danced in the palm of that seemingly weak man's hand.

“Are there any rumors you’re spreading about the U clan?”

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"No way. I just said that the adopted son who entered the U main family is still small and adorable."

Chue shivered unconsciously. What Jun said was no secret. It was even brought up at the meeting of the influential clans.

However, the head of the U family was old and had health problems. If something happened to him, his son under ten years old would inherit the position.

This was being highlighted.

The reason why the U family was recently attacked by a “new faction” was more than enough.

"Do you hate the U Clan?"

"I don't hate the U Clan. It's just that I think they're too nice to my father, my younger sister, and me. How far will they have to fall before they finally drive us out?" Jun is twisted. His masculinity, twisted into a spiral, will never return.

“Even if you don’t do anything directly, how about I tell you that you will be punished, Jun? If you are found guilty of incitement by spreading rumors, you are a sinner.”

“Then at least I can finally leave my position as a military officer.”

"If you wanted to leave, you could have done so a long time ago."

“I don’t have the courage to do this alone.”

A first class coward.

"If I am punished, could my father and younger sister be dragged along with me?"

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"Don't you want to cause them trouble?"

“No, if possible, I hope that both of them will be rejected by the U Clan and thrown out of the mansion without a penny.” Ujun said this with a contemptuous smile.

"Hmm. You look like Chue, don't you?" It seems like they're in the same line after all. Hulang has a different mold. That's what makes them easy to manipulate.

"I hate my family too."

Chue also responds with a smile.

She hates her mother who abandoned her. She hates her father who doesn't see her and only looks at her mother. He hates her older half-brother who, blinded by a misplaced sense of justice, is destroying himself. She doesn't hate or care about her older half-brothers, who know nothing about her.
As for her younger half-brother, whom her mother adores... one day, he will prepare an "accident".

“No, what I hate is my father and my sister. I get along with my mother and my stepsister.”

"Oh, do you like your stepsister?"

"Yes. She is the typical bunny girl who knows she is weak, as Miss Lishu smiles genuinely."

“My father never accepted his weakness. He failed in business because of his weakness, and as a result, he became the adopted son-in-law of the main family, despite having my mother. he was successful in business. Her desire to be an officer was a way to appear strong.
As a result, my mother ran the business alone, and after the death of the main wife, my father made her his main weakness.

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maintain business while my father carried the burden of being the main husband."

"It's rumored that Mr. Uryuu has a talent for business, but it was his wife who was truly capable, huh?"

“Yes. My sister was also taken into the main house when she was little, so she grew up without knowing her weakness. Because my father surrounded her with personal servants and the previous wife died some time later, he mocked the royal daughter because she was an ‘add-on’. She didn’t know her place.”

“But Jun, you didn’t do anything to stop her, right?”

"Because I am weaker than my father."

What a humble man. He almost inspires compassion.

“Like a weak and brittle plant without roots, I should wither somewhere.”

“Hmm.” Chue was hesitant.

"What is happening?"

"Well, that's a shame."

"A shame what?"

"You, June."

Jun had an expression of incomprehension.

“If you were only ten years younger, your natural weakness, which might be called naivety, would be an invaluable advantage. You are much more likely to survive than a mediocre warrior.”

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"What are you talking about?"

“Jun, do you want to be my successor?” Jun’s eyes widened at Chue’s proposal.

Chue had lost the use of his dominant hand. The Mi family's position was at the bottom of the hierarchy. Climbing the hierarchy required rapidly increasing one's resources and allies.

Although he wanted to bring a young girl named Xiaohong from the West, it was not possible. Instead, he would recruit a guy who specialized in a certain field, a monster in a sense.

"I don't understand."

"It's easy. Just keep spreading rumors like before. The only difference is that it will include the intention of important people."

“The intentions of important people? But to be honest, I don’t have much loyalty.”

Jun was a straightforward man. However, this was something that Chue also understood.

“Loyalty doesn’t matter if you can get something irreplaceable in return. Throwing a family you hate out on the street without a penny is a piece of cake, right?”

“That’s very attractive.” Jun was intrigued, but there was still something decisive missing.

"Do you need anything else?"

“Then how about, as a form of redemption, I try to give Miss Lishu the happiness that has been taken from her until now?

“No, not at all,” Chue smiled. “From now on, I will teach you many things. It is a privilege to receive teachings from a

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married woman, don’t you think?”

“Although I really don't like married women because they are problematic.”

Thus a very problematic relationship between teacher and disciple was born.